
関村イムヤ
ILLUSTRATION 山下ナナオ
ArianRose
アリアンローズ
悪役転生だけどどうしてこうなった。
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I Reincarnated as a Noble Girl Villainess But Why Did It Turn Out This Way?

– Akuyaku Tensei Dakedo Doushite Kou Natta –

- Act 1 -

Caricature

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[Translated by: Omega Harem Translations]

– Synopsis –

Eliza Kaldia, who reincarnated as a noble girl villainess in a fantasy otome game, was stuck in a world that seemed far from her image of how noble girls should be living, as the fated events of the game were still far off while she remained a child. In the first place, it was suspected if she could even live to make it to the school setting of the game. Due to changes in the situation of the neighboring country which never appeared in the original game, the world became nothing like the flowery school life from the game. It was a world where even young girls had to take up weapons. How did it turn out this way…

I don't have any cheat-like abilities. I can't use magic. Though, my sense of ethics might have become a little twisted due to being reincarnated.


テレジア伯爵
エリザの後見人。カルディア領の領主代行を務める。
エルグナード・エインシュバルク
ユグフェナ王領の騎士。後にエリザの猶縁を結ぶ。
ギュンター
カルディア領軍の兵士。実質的な両軍のリーダー格。
カミル
テレジア伯爵によってエリザの侍従になった少年。
クラウディア・ローレンツォレル
エリザの遊び相手兼護衛として王都から招かれた娘。
エリザ・カルディア
幼い頃のエリザ。テレジア伯爵の下、領主として様々な事を学ぶ。
ラトカ
カルディア領の孤児。エリザに恨みを抱いている。
エリザ・カルディア・エインシュバルク
異世界で生きた女の記憶を持って生まれ、それ故に別の運命を辿る事になったこの物語の主人公。カルディア領の領主を務める、幼き女伯爵。

登場人物

Parmigram Dukedom

Giograd Dukedom

Molton Domain?

Marquis Nordsturm's Northern faction

Fushobari Region

Amon Nor

Ex-Artolas (now Densel)

Bandishia Plateau

Densel Dukedom

Ugaria Region

Artsbelf Region

Jugfena Region

Jugfena Royal Domain

Kaldia Domain

?

Stadel Domain

Royal Capital

Monster Forest

Rindarl Union

Amon Albus

Henznaut Domain

Genas Domain? (Ex-Galbaito)

Rogshia Domain?

Genas Domain

Planates Dukedom

Arxia Kingdom

Greenfield Region

Freche Domain

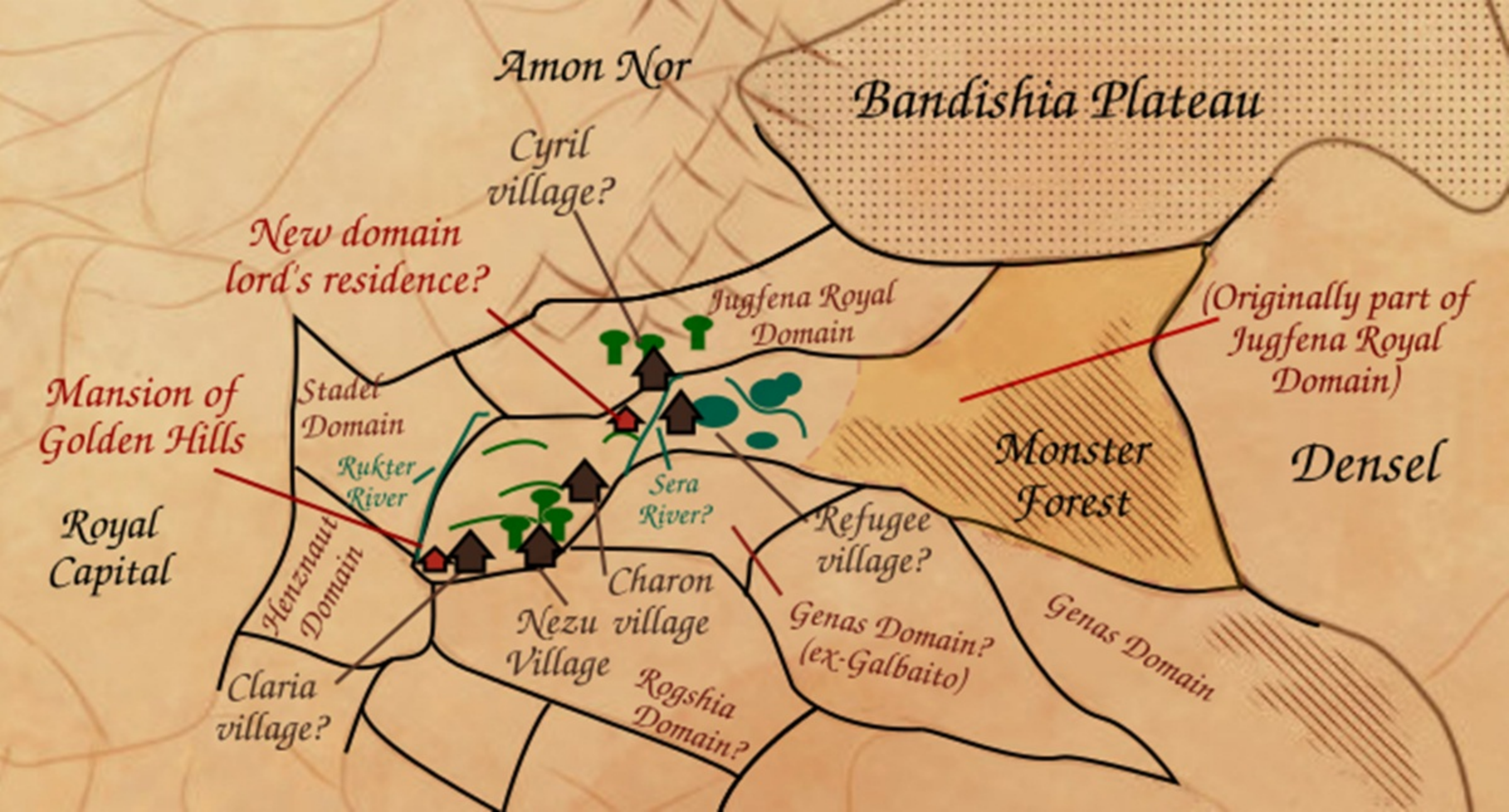
Freche Region

Ruktoferd Domain

Amon Karan

Various Lesser Countries

Pactoshiki?


Amon Nor
Bandishia Plateau
Cyril village?
New domain lord's residence?
Jugfena Royal Domain
(Originally part of Jugfena Royal Domain)
Mansion of Golden Hills
Stadel Domain
Rukter River
Sera River?
Monster Forest
Densel
Royal Capital
Henznaut Domain
Refugee village?
Charon Nezu village
Nezu Village
Genas Domain? (ex-Galbaito)
Genas Domain
Claria village?
Rogshia Domain?

【 PART I 】

Chapter 1
Poisoned soup

Inside my head, rather than whiting out, it was more like my head was being filled with darkness.

Without hesitation, I sunk the hemlock into the pot of soup. I didn't know what kind of face I was making or where I was looking at all. With leather gloves that were way too big for me on my hands, I thought it looked silly and felt like laughing at it.

Although I cried when I first decided to poison my family, I have no more tears to cry now.

As I looked at the finely ground poison while being extremely careful not to touch it, my head was completely filled with blankness, with no space whatsoever for emotion to get in.

Luckily, on the dinner table was a large quantity of seafood and other delicacies that my vile mother probably got somewhere from unscrupulous merchants. The irony is, this was all supposed to be in celebration of my birthday today. I just happened to recognize a poisonous plant from my previous world, maybe the merchants that sold this food had tried to assassinate us, is what I thought people would think. No matter what, I probably wouldn't be suspected due to my age.

Viscount Kaldia and his family that was famous for being villainous, all died, leaving their daughter Eliza who had just turned two as the only survivor. For the crime of poisoning the viscount's entire family, a merchant who was once again famous for being villainous was executed.

……And that is the story of how I, Eliza Kaldia, succeeded the position of a Junior Viscount.

Since hemlock is a poisonous plant that doesn't take effect immediately, I thought that maybe someone would survive, but it seems my fears were unfounded. They either died due to a lack of oxygen caused by paralysis, or choked to death on hurl that got caught in their throat, or hit their head and died as they lost consciousness, there was

a rich variety in the way that my family died, but the scene that my crime had caused wasn't even able to traumatize me.

In my previous life, hemlock had caused my younger sister to become hospitalized, causing quite a commotion. Because it almost killed her, it had remained as a frightening memory up until now, so it's ironic that I've now used that memory to poison and kill others.

It would be no lie to say that my mean, base mother was interested in nothing but money, and my father's favorite interest was to see blood and pain along with contorted facial expressions, so this was their punishment. And since all my relatives were wiped out, as the only survivor of the Kaldia family I inherited everything.

Of course, taking my age into consideration, it was impossible for me to actually run the Kaldia family, so this seems to have sown the seeds of a pointless power struggle among the conservative nobles in this country. Well, if they all crush each other, it might even turn out to be a good thing for me.

Obviously since I was only a two year old infant, I wasn't even considered a suspect in my family's assassination even though I was the one who benefitted the most by inheriting everything, but of course I wouldn't be able to take up the duties that came with being a Viscount immediately. For the time being, the royal capital sent someone to become my guardian. That the person who came would be more human than my father, was all I wished for. After all, if someone came here who was just like my father, then I wouldn't know for what I even killed my family for. It's not even funny to think about how rotten this country must be if that were to be the case.

Although I don't know if the heavens responded to my dearest wish, the vigorous elderly aristocrat that the royal capital sent to me let out a terrible wail at seeing the terrible state of my family's lands and economic situation.

From haphazardly stacked bills and debts, to the countless number of idiotic, despotic laws and higher taxes than permitted that had been enacted illegally despite the country's national laws. The people in this domain had been under such a tyrannic regime that they were too exhausted to even complain. Meaning, the people in my domain are all tattered to the point of falling apart. I can safely say that hell would be something like this.

Of course, I was powerless to do anything about this.

Therefore, no matter how elderly my guardian was, until I became an adult, or at least until I matured and was able to provisionally take power, it is imperative that I rebuild my domain no matter how difficult it was. After all, that's why I killed all six of my family members, my parents and all my siblings.

Well…… I guess, there's also one more reason. And that reason is related to why I was able to carry out this assassination. Long story short, it's because I'm someone who reincarnated into this world.

Cutting to the chase, I'm able to recall that this world seems to be that of an otome game that I played in my previous world. Of course, I didn't know this right when I was born. I figured this out when I heard a maid singing one of this country's lullabies to me.

The supreme power in the northwest of the continent, the Arxia Kingdom. That's the country I was born into, the country where Viscount Kaldia's lands are located. From the lullaby, and from day to day life here, I think that life here is similar to medieval Europe…… probably. Well, I only have a rough idea of what that would be like. After all, I wasn't that interested in history in my previous life, nor was I all that interested in foreign countries. But, I'm certain that there was no such country called the Arxia Kingdom in my previous world.

However, the reason why I'm certain this is a different world, is that this country's name just happened to be that of one in a game I played in my previous world. What made me certain of it, was myself. Or more accurately speaking, it was the name given to me, and the way my family was.

Eliza Kaldia. Combined with the Arxia Kingdom, that's not simply a coincidence of European naming anymore. The unfortunate thing was, my name matched exactly with the name of one of the game characters.

I hate this name, is what I first thought when I recognized my name.

After all, it was easy to associate this name with the Eliza Kaldia that had appeared in the game, a truly repulsive, villainous game character. The youngest daughter of the Kaldia family, the family whose misdeeds piled up so much that they were eventually executed by the country. Even though she was born as an aristocrat, without even thinking about why she was allowed to have a higher position than commoners, she

seems to misunderstand commoners as nothing more than garbage to be stepped upon, is the type of character that she was written to be.

At first I thought it was just a coincidence, but after seeing the characteristics of my family, and when finding out that the name of the country I lived in matched the Arxia Kingdom in the game, I had to admit it even if I hated the idea. Meaning, this must be the same Arxia Kingdom as from the game.

Then, what I immediately thought about was what would eventually happen in the game.

The story was that the heroine would come over from the neighboring country to the Arxia Kingdom's school where many nobles gathered in order to find a marriage partner.

Obstructing the heroine, I suppose you could call her the rival, as someone meant only to give the heroine difficulties, was the viscount's daughter, Eliza Kaldia, and no matter which ending you ended up on, her entire family would be executed.

After all, even if you take away Eliza's actions at school, since her family's crimes within their own lands wouldn't change, the only difference between the different paths in the game was how fast they would all be executed, is what I remembered.

I had originally borrowed this game from my younger sister in order to kill time, but now that I've reincarnated into this world I need to really think things through clearly.

No matter what, I definitely won't face a future like that in the game. With the current situation, I figured that I would eventually be executed.

With that taken into consideration, among other things, helped me decide to poison my entire family. Something like a destruction flag, I'm going to utterly destroy it to the roots as early as possible.

……As a result I feel like I've done something even worse than the Eliza in the game. After all, I assassinated my entire family. I don't know the specifics of the laws in this country, but, from what I remember hearing about laws in medieval Europe, the crime of killing your family was said to be punished by quartering. Well, since I used poison, I might also be called a witch and burned at the stake.

Since I have no intention of suffering through such painful executions, I'm going to take this secret about my family's deaths with me to the grave.

From now on, since I can't do anything right now, I'll just leave rebuilding my domain to my guardian, and it probably won't be a problem for me to live quietly for now. Fortunately, it seems that he was even able to calculate how much money would be required to rebuild my domain, my guardian, the Senior Earl Terejia, seemed to be quite a capable person. My father can't even compare. ……Once I become the family head I wish I could change my name back to Maria, and as for why it's probably because my personality in the previous life has greatly affected my life in this one. Oh well, countries like Austria and France don't exist here.

Chapter 2
Golden sea

Two years passed. In just two years, my domain has changed greatly. Outside my window, all that I could see beyond the fence, was rippling waves of wheat. He's done quite well in only two years, is what I was thinking, Earl Terejia can be proud of what he's accomplished.

Due to the despotism of the Kaldia family, the people's resources here had been stretched to the limits. Since my shallow father had been scared of rebellion, he repressed the people so much, that was the biggest problem of this domain. If they don't work in the fields, then there will be less income. Even an idiot could see that this would only eventually lead to self-ruin.

But, saying that my father did not completely understand the famine issues within my domain, might have been an exaggeration. He knew that repressing the people as much as he did would reduce income. Then, how did he maintain such an opulent lifestyle in bad taste?

……When I learned about my family's incredibly evil "source of income," I was unable to stop myself from throwing up at the bottomless pits of human desire and evil, even if he was my own father.

Among the punishments for people in this domain, there's something called forced labor. Basically, putting someone to work. With my common sense from the previous world, there wasn't really anything like this in my country, so at first I was a bit confused.

When my father started the forced labor system nineteen years ago, he would take girls from twelve to eighteen years old, and boys from ten to fifteen years old, and force them into sex service. Without sugarcoating it, he was basically treating the domain's people as slaves.

In the Arxia Kingdom, "slavery" is considered illegal.

It's clearly stated in national law that slavery is illegal, but, it's only there in the first place because the state church, the Ar Xia church, protested slavery on a large scale.

The actuality is that most commoners are under a system similar to slavery, called serfdom, in this country.

Father, with his despicable cleverness, came up with this trick to get around the title of “slavery.” First, saying that this wasn’t a demotion or a lifetime thing like slavery. Also, sending the gathered laborers to other domains to work as well. Calling this only as “labor” to the very end.

In this country, no, on this entire continent, people are merely considered to be the property of their domain’s lord. This was considered to be common sense here, but I disagree with it. Meaning, a rental fee could be earned by loaning out the “property,” it had to be concealed in this flashy manner, and nobody would blame my father.

Since anti-slavery laws are strong in the Arxia Kingdom, openly practicing slavery would mean getting exiled. Although Earl Terejia seems to have a strong sense of ethics, there’s probably corrupt nobles in other parts of Arxia.

Because this country has enjoyed a long period of peace, I wonder if that’s caused Arxia to stagnate and begin to rot from inside. Unfortunately, I found out that “laborers” were dispatched to countless houses. And, even now there are still many laborers.

These laborers are an example of the numerous despotic laws that my father enacted like vomit. It’s terrible. “Laborers” that returned from after pregnancy would be abused even more, increasing even further the amount of psychological damage dealt to them.

Since they were under an unbearably high tax, many commoners were in the harsh situation of facing starvation, and there were so many famished people that improving the quality of life within my domain was slow progress.

That’s why I’m saying, things are better already. Earl Terejia had put the safety of my domain’s people as his first priority.

He started with the hunger issue. He sold off all the senselessly expensive stuff in the house. That’s good. I wouldn’t even know where to sell all these things. That money was used to provide free meals to the people.

At the same time as distributing food to the villages, he also promised forgiveness to the villagers that had been forced into banditry by the terrible conditions. At this time

I didn't know it yet but, Earl Terejia seems to have purchased food and supplies from out of his own pocket as well. But, he calculated it as a loan to Viscountess Kaldia in my name, is what I found out much later.

Next, he captured all the wrongdoers that benefitted from working together with my father. Since most of the Kaldia family had been assassinated in a single day, they had all fled. I learned this after I started associating with other nobles. The reason being, they had taken what valuables they could with them when they had fled. After executing the primary conspirators responsible and distributing their wealth, along with addressing the hunger issue, the people's resentment towards Earl Terejia and me was able to take a 180 degree turn and view us in a much better light.

After that, it's just a matter of improving our popularity with the people in my domain. It's a good thing that the people were so weak that they weren't even able to consider revolt. Their bodies and minds had been completely in tatters, after all.

And so, for the past two years Earl Terejia has worked tirelessly day and night for the sake of my domain. Looking at the golden sight outside my window, I cried a little at the knowledge.

Earl Terejia is rather elderly. Rather, it can be said that he's quite a bit older than the life expectancy in this country. It's due to the standard of living. It's not strange at all for anyone seven and older to die of something, and reaching seventy was about the limit. I could only watch such an elderly noble become more and more haggard with his work, while I was being taken care of by the nanny he prepared for me, Mrs. Galton.

In fact, I've still never even spoken with him. At first, it was simply because Earl Terejia was very busy. The situation was that the people in my domain had to be managed and helped as quickly as possible. There was no time for stopping, his work arrived for him like angry waves crashing down. Earl Terejia himself had no time to spare to take care of children. And I was fine with that. I had no reason to complain.

It happened that night.

I was leaning out the window, looking at the clear, bright night sky and its sparkling stars with nary a cloud in sight. I didn't really mean anything by it. It's just that when I was looking outside earlier, I happened to want to see the stars later for some reason.

"Do you want to go out, Eliza?"

A low, hoarse voice that still had a bit of power to it came from beside me. I think I could liken it to rumbling thunder. Before I realized it, he had put his hand on my back and I felt a nervous feeling in my stomach, and my body was stiff with tension. I don't know what the reason could be for him suddenly speaking to me is, since he's never even said "hello" to me in the two years since he's been here.

"……Why did you think something like that?'

Although I knew it was rude to answer a question with a question, but the earl didn't seem to mind, and looked at the stars that I had just been looking at.

"Earlier during the day, I heard that you had been crying to go out."

"Eh?"

"I had been wondering if you were lamenting your misfortune at being unable to go out, but it seems that I was mistaken. Yet, child, why is it that when you have never even cried before today, that you would cry over something trivial that happened when you have such a lovely personality?"

Mrs. Galton must have reported it to him, I see. While looking at the wheat shining brilliantly in the sun earlier today, I was indeed crying. My nanny must have seen me earlier today since she had been taking care of me for the last two years, and I'm like a daughter to her now. Oh, and, I suppose three and four year olds should have been crying more, eh. Since I'm able to speak, I also didn't have anything to cry over or complain about, I've finally realized belatedly that it may have seemed a little strange.

"Indeed, as far as I can remember, I've never left this house. However, I understand already that it's out of necessity. I don't have any special interest in going outside or anything like that."

"……"

"Today…… I was just looking at the wheat fields outside. It wasn't that I wanted to go out."

The earl who had been silently looking at the stars without speaking, suddenly returned his gaze to me. He was looking me straight in the eye, but I didn't know what he was thinking.

“The wheat is finally ripe, now. When I thought about that, I involuntarily started crying for some reason.”

And with that, the earl and I stared at each other in silence. His black pupils were still filled with a strong light in them, but I was still unable to tell what he was thinking at all. The eyes are supposed to be windows to the soul is what I suddenly recalled, so I started thinking about phrases from the previous world. If you gaze into an abyss……

“The abyss will gaze back into you.”

“Eh?”

I was shocked at hearing something so unexpected, it happened in an instant. By then, Earl Terejia had already turned around and started leaving. Without saying anything else, the earl disappeared from my sight in the hallway.

Chapter 3
A morning of eavesdropping

It's been a few days since I turned five.

It's morning during what's left of early spring. It wasn't time for Mrs. Galton to come wake me up yet, I might have woken up because I sensed something. Something seemed to be abuzz in the mansion, I could hear the adults discussing something in low voices. I hurriedly changed from my pajamas into casual wear, and left my room as softly as possible. The hallway was still a bit dim and chilly.

In this country…… or rather, this area, the most common casual wear is tunics and dalmatics, they're a bit too needlessly heavy for me. It's such a pain to carry the hems so that they don't make a sound against the ground.

Originally, I'm supposed to stay in my room obediently until Mrs. Galton comes to get me, but today it seems like something is afoot. It should be fine if I just see what's going on without being a bother to anyone.

This mansion is called the Mansion of Golden Hills, but given the Kaldia family's former predilection towards wild extravagance, it actually seems a little small in comparison. The name comes from the wheat fields under direct control of the family surrounding the mansion. In this domain, the areas under direct control primarily harvest high-priced wheat, while commoners mainly have to raise rye for themselves. But three years ago, these wheat fields had been a blighted wasteland due to a plague.

It seems that in Arxia, the residence of a lord of the domain is usually on the scale of a small castle, but since the Kaldia family's domain has been small and poor for several generations, they couldn't afford to build something like a castle. And as for why my father never even maintained the place at all…… He was afraid of attracting attention with flashy reconstruction. His hobby instead was to expand the dungeons as much as possible, really, he was the lowest of the low. He didn't even consider that his own actions caused the people to resent him, leading to a loop where he would imprison more and more people. Because of this, the Mansion of Golden Hills was considered to be one of the smallest noble residences, split up so that the second and third floors had various bedrooms and empty rooms, and the first floor had rooms such as the drawing room and kitchen. My bedroom was located in basically the innermost part

of the second floor, and even though the floor was decently thick, I could still hear a commotion from downstairs all the way from the second floor, so in order not to be caught, I quietly moved until the sounds grew louder and I reached the staircase. After all, it's been the first time ever since I killed my family that there's been such a large commotion.

Hiding myself in the shadows of the pillars, I peeked from the staircase railings over towards the entrance. Both entrance doors were wide open, and several busy-seeming adults were bustling about repeatedly. They seemed to mostly consist of fully armed men, and the ones that were all wearing leather with no sense of uniformity, they were probably Viscount Kaldia's personal troops. The soldiers that were wearing metal armor, were probably prepared by Earl Terejia for some reason, or maybe even sent here by the House of Lords for some purpose……

Given that soldiers from other territories generally wore chainmail, it feels like the technological level of my domain might be almost one hundred years behind the other domains. Because of the House of Lords, the nobles aren't totally isolated from each other, so a certain level of standard has been achieved across Arxia, making my domain's soldiers stand out as rather unusual. Once again, this is just appalling.

Currently, this mansion is inhabited by eleven people, including me and Earl Terejia. My nanny, Mrs. Galton, my governess, Mrs. Marshan, the earl's secretary, Bellway, the cook Nathan and the baker Olga, the maids Isadora and Phoebe, the gardener Boriswaf, and the maidservant Mary.

The people that were usually still sleeping at this time were only me, Mrs. Galton, and Mrs. Marshan, while everyone else would have started working already. Anyways, I could hear someone's angry voice without any hesitation to it coming from the drawing room. Even though I wanted to know what was going on and even sneaked out of my room to here, no matter how much I concentrated I couldn't make out what was being said.

I wonder if it's better to give up and go back to my room. It's probably almost time for Mrs. Galton to come to my room in order to wake me up. The thin clouds outside the window were beginning to let a few rays of sunshine through the dimness.

Thinking while running my hand through my hair, I slowly began to return. Just at this moment, someone ran to the drawing room.

Maybe he didn't close the door because he was in such a hurry, or maybe he just felt it wasn't necessary. Now that the door to the drawing room was no longer closed, I could suddenly hear a sonorous voice loud and clearly from where I was.

"Here's my report. Agil Irishettsu, stationed at Cyril village, is reporting that the wolf dragon draconis has been discovered."

– Draconis? At the term that sounded out of place, I involuntarily stepped forward a bit. It's a name I've only heard in fairy tales here, so I was rather tense about this. The strange name caught my full attention and piqued my curiosity, and I completely forgot about returning to my room.

In one of my bedtime stories that Mrs. Galton had read to me, there were a few of them that could be counted as heroic epics. Something that didn't change from world to world, was the fact that morality plays where monsters were exterminated were always popular. For example, the tale where the Ar Xia church's shrine maiden, Xia Fema's servant Wetzlar defeated the giant evil wolf dragon and rescued his wife and daughter is famous throughout all of Arxia. Really, this is closer to a myth than a fairy tale, but……

There's also other stories like how the monkey sage and the ancient wolf dragon have lived for thousands of years, but this is just another commonly told fairy tale.

According to it, draconis is a gigantic wolf with scales, with a snake's tail, and wings on its back like a bat's that allow it to fly.

I had thought it was only a fusion of several beasts made from imagination, but it seems that wasn't the case.

The draconis actually exists. Come to think of it, this world isn't only a separate world entirely, I finally remembered that this is also a fantasy world. If I think back really hard on the game's information, the word "monster" did seem to appear several times in it.

Of course, in the ordinary Amon Nor Mountains, it was said that in the farthest innermost portion of the Bandishia Plateau, they lived and ate the snow snakes there, but since I'd never seen such a thing for myself, I didn't believe it up until now.

"Anyways, something like the draconis suddenly appearing. Exactly what is going on?"

"……Somehow it happened."

Since I slipped out from my room and heard about the draconis, Mrs. Galton had a strange look on her face but I somehow came up with a good excuse although I was rather ambiguous and vague. After all, surely I couldn't tell her the truth about slipping out and what I just heard.

Even in the afternoon, the commotion in the mansion still hadn't died down. It didn't seem like Earl Terejia was trying to hide the information on the draconis from me. He did seem to tell Mrs. Galton to not let me loiter around too close to the drawing room, but I stayed in the dining hall next to the drawing room and could still hear everything being said just fine.

The discovered draconis was quite large. According to the stories I heard before, draconis were supposed to be rather similar to wolves, preferring to live in herds. That's why the draconis from this village was being called a lone wolf.

I wondered what exactly the draconis had come down especially for from the Amon Nor Mountains, to the place where humans lived. Since the mountains weren't a fitting location for a domain there, there really should be no reason. Since they're saying it's such a large individual, I doubt it would have lost in some territory war amongst its own kind up there either.

"Eliza-sama, it's time for your meal now!"

"……Pardon me."

There was too much to think about so I had lost sight of my surroundings while I concentrated. After a sharp rebuke from Mrs. Galton at neglecting my meal, I hurriedly stopped thinking about the draconis for the time being.

Chapter 3.5
Memories from dreams within dreams

I was alone in a lurid, hollow, dismal, yet beautiful world. I vaguely wondered if I was dreaming. While floating up and down, I merely looked at something that seemed like bubbles.

Is it alright to call these my memories, I wonder. No, these don't exist in my current life.

Is it alright to call these recordings, I wonder. No, I can't touch or feel anything.

The colorless bubbles became smells, sounds, images, I could feel something against my skin, and could taste things at times too. Although it was nostalgic, I also felt a sense of emptiness inside as well. It was as if I was forced to pick up a book I'd already read before, and forced into reading it again.

This isn't me. While I was confident of this, the knowledge contained within were things only I knew. Meaning, at the same time, this is undoubtedly also me.

How should I call this. – I think its term is my ordinary, banal previous life.

I was born and raised as a regular girl with regular parents and a younger sister in a much different world where civilization was highly developed. Other than the fact that I died rather young, there was nothing special about me at all. I didn't have any hobbies or passions like my younger sister, I was moderately cool about everything, a person lacking in personality.

And the thing is, the girl that I used to be gave off the impression that she had no interest in anyone or anything around her.

Among that girl's colorless memory bubbles, only vivid images appeared. Meaning, recent memories from right before she died. As I looked at her life, I felt like I was treading water, it was distant and dull to me, as I was forced to relive these memories I'd already gone through.

Of course, since that girl is now a different existence from me, although I understand her way of thinking, I'm no longer the exact same wavelength as her. Another way of saying it, it felt more like a sense of intimacy just like towards my mother and younger sister.

"Lately, I've been getting so tired from everything……"

The girl's voice sounded muddy and weak. Before she died, she had kept thinking that. Running would make her instantly tired, I wonder if it's because she never participated in any school activities. Also, even climbing the stairs would make her have shortness of breath. I think it's because she really lacked physical strength.

Come to think of it, I remembered about that girl at this point in time. Lately, she would only use elevators and escalators, to decrease the amount of walking she would have to do. Whenever she left her house, she would ride a car or take a train, she never even walked one kilometer from her house.

As this memory bubble disappeared, another one replaced it.

"Something seems off. I'm this lacking in physical fitness?"

Before she realized it, the girl had begun burning out. She had difficulties getting to sleep every night due to her breathlessness, and she would often get dizzy.

There was also terrible edema on her hands, feet, and face, I wonder if it's because of lack of sleep?

As her physical condition got worse and worse, and after she fainted more than five times, she was withdrawn from school for medical reasons and simply rested at home, and thoroughly managed her own lifestyle. Like a machine, she would get up every day at a predetermined time, take a calculated diet, and get a moderate amount of exercise.

However, her situation didn't improve. On the contrary, she even began feeling pains in her chest.

Then one night, she convulsed in her death throes, and died.

The memory bubbles felt like they were distorting my body. The girl's experience and suffering dully wrapped around my body, and felt like it was trying to crush me, but I somehow managed to withstand it and moved on to the next memory bubble.

The girl had very few clear opinions on anything. It wasn't limited to only difficult subjects, for example she couldn't even say what her favorite foods were, or give an opinion on whether it was right or wrong to eat the more intelligent animals.

In contrast, the girl's younger sister was a person that clearly expressed her opinions on everything, and made her like or dislike of things clear rather than remaining ambiguous.

Her younger sister had felt dissatisfaction with the older sister's weak will, and conversely the girl wasn't able to understand how her younger sister had the ability to clearly speak her thoughts on everything.

As if to show everything more clearly, the bubble had mostly disappeared and become a blur. The next memory bubble appeared.

"Your physical condition doesn't seem to be so great lately. Are you alright?"

The third time that I fainted in the classroom during lecture, the teacher finally had a one-on-one discussion with me. The teacher was shocked at the girl's badly swollen face, and encouraged her to get a checkup at the hospital. As suggested, the girl got tested at the internal medicine department, but there was no clear result, and the only conclusion was that she should review and revise her lifestyle.

Although she tried to do what she could for her irregular school life, the changes in the girl's body continued.

The colorless memory bubble faded. As I watched the memories, it felt like my heart was gradually drying up. Without paying any attention to that, the next memory appeared, and I was reluctantly forced to accept it.

After the girl began staying home from school and was planning out her daily life, her parents suggested that she take up a hobby for fun. Indeed, the girl's original plans had been a bit too mechanical.

However, she couldn't think of anything she wanted to do for fun at all. She had basically no interests at all. Normally she just watched TV or surfed the internet, or

read manga that she would borrow from friends, or flip through magazines, she would just pass the time meaninglessly.

“Hey, why don’t you try this game that’s being featured right now?”

Maybe she couldn’t bear to see the state the girl was in, one day the girl’s younger sister made a suggestion.

At this memory, I got goosebumps all over my body. For some reason, I really didn’t want to see this memory only. I got a really bad feeling.

The moment I thought so, I escaped with a strong momentum. The colorless bubbles, the lurid colors, everything was rapidly fading.

But even so, I didn’t wake up from my dream. While still sleeping lightly and feeling like everything was so far from me, I looked back at my previous world again.

I fell down into the muddy world of sleep. In the darkness, beautiful yet lurid colors were overlapping. If this is a visualization of my own spirit, even I feel that it’s quite bleak. I’m not quite able to describe it accurately with words, but it was a twisted sight, that seemed terribly hollow to me.

Even though I was so immersed in my dream world, strangely my mind still retained quite a sharp sense for emotion. It feels like while I’m asleep, my heart is shriveling.

Memory bubbles appeared again out of somewhere, they were wriggling. What will I see this time, I wonder. At any rate, I had no way of resisting, so I’ll just quietly watch them obediently.

They were some pretty old memories. It happened when I had been just a little older than I am now.

In front of the young girl that used to be me, was her younger sister that was scratching in pain at herself due to the effect of some plant. The girl was watching the sight in horror.

The girl’s younger sister had been playing at a shallow river. Her whole family was out that day on a picnic. Her parents noticed that her younger sister was violently

thrashing about in the river, and came running over. My father forced my younger sister to throw up by sticking a finger down her mouth, while my mother called an ambulance.

Her younger sister had accidentally swallowed some leaves of the hemlock growing by the water's edge. It seems that some of the leaves had fallen into the water, so she swallowed them along with the river water.

It's an extremely clear memory. Even though my memories had begun fading after I reincarnated, this is one of the clearest memories that I can recall. I had used this memory to kill my entire family.

Even just a few tiny leaves had almost killed my younger sister. When I had shredded maybe hundreds of the leaves into the soup, it was a memory that remained carved into my mind even up to now.

Without paying attention to my feelings, the memories kept changing on me to new scenes.

"Oh? ……So there was this type of game as well."

The girl was holding a video game controller pointed at a TV screen. The 3D CG character looked pretty good on the screen, and places that seemed like western palaces were beautifully displayed on the screen as well. In front of all this scenery, was the girl that was the heroine of this game.

"- If you take this path and turn right, the crown prince should be there."

Next to the girl, her younger sister was giving her information on the game's capture targets. Even though the girl really didn't care for spoilers about characters and story that she hadn't seen yet, her younger sister kept blabbing on.

Maybe it was that she sensed that her older sister was approaching death, and that she wanted to have more conversation time together.

"If you listen to the crown prince, you'll also learn about the military commander-in-chief's grandson. But, you won't be able to go down the crown prince path then."

On the screen was a young boy with blonde hair. It seems that he's the crown prince.

The screen darkened as some conversation choices popped up, while an image of the crown prince remained on the left side. It seems that there's different screens for when the characters are conversing with each other.

"Hey, Emilia Rindarl. What's up?"

Although the lines had voice acting, the voice actor acting the part sounded a bit unnatural. The girl furrowed her eyebrows as she went to the options menu, and turned the voice acting to the OFF option.

"Ah, wait."

The girl ignored her younger sister's objection. The tone of the male voice had sounded a bit too flirtatious, and the girl felt uncomfortable at that.

This is quite a long memory. Even though I didn't want to see it, the memory continued on. Still, I couldn't avert my gaze. Even if I tried to pay no attention to it, I wouldn't be able to pretend to forget about it immediately. My heart was pounding.

Even though I didn't want to see it and tried to resist, I couldn't move even a finger. Even though I'm feeling distressed, this time I wasn't able to escape.

The game's BGM suddenly changed, to a much more aggressive soundtrack. A girl in a gaudy dress with black hair and sharp eyes appeared. She had a much different type of design from any character that had appeared so far.

"Ah, it's Eliza."

The girl's younger sister suddenly muttered that, and the girl learned that Eliza was the heroine's rival and enemy.

There was a noise ringing in my head. The fog was already fading from my head, and I just kept staring at the remnants of this piece of memory in my mind.

I can't say that the person on the screen merely looked like me. After all, the person on the screen really had been "me."

The moment she appeared, it was made clear that she was the heroine Emilia's enemy. She's always dressed in vulgar and gaudy clothing, and has a twisted, evil personality.

She would feign politeness while getting in the way of the relationship between the crown prince and the daughter of the archduke from the neighboring country.

That was the type of character that Eliza Kaldia was.

Chapter 4
The baby draconis

My days where I still couldn't go beyond the mansion or the garden continued as always with my schedule remaining the same each day.

In the mornings, Mrs. Galton would come wake me up, help me get dressed then perform morning worship, then head to breakfast together in the dining hall. Mrs. Marshan would then teach me various subjects until noon, have a snack, then exercise in the garden if it's sunny, or read if the weather is bad, then wash myself with hot water before having dinner, and then finally perform an evening prayer as well before sleeping.

Because as a noble girl, my life was controlled and scheduled very tightly by my nanny, I basically had no free time.

After the commotion caused by the draconis, the mansion eventually returned to life as usual. Mrs. Galton and I went on with our lives as usual while all the adults hurriedly bustled around, that is to say the event wasn't able to change our daily routine. Earl Terejia was also directly passing me educational materials on culture and moral sense.

One day early in the second month of the year, the mansion returned to being silent for once again. The adults that had made the mansion noisy every day might have captured the draconis, or maybe they've left for the extermination now.

I received Mrs. Marshan's lessons as if nothing had ever happened, and just like usual the three of us were eating together. Suddenly, there was a disturbance at the entrance, and the door to the dining hall opened. And then Earl Terejia came in, and even bothered to tell me personally to come to the garden to talk to him after I was finished eating.

At first, I was wondering exactly what it could be.

While I'm surprised that the earl had something to say to me, even more surprising was that the earl personally came over to inform me rather than having someone else do it for him.

Ever since our first conversation that one night last year, I've had several chances to speak with him directly, but he would always wave me off with one hand. Because of that, I wondered if an emergency had occurred and packed a snack in a hurry.

Even though I knew it was a breach of etiquette, I ran towards the garden.

The thing in question he wanted to talk to me about, was about raising a baby draconis, it turned out to be something I completely didn't expect.

It seems that the draconis that appeared in my domain earlier had been a female individual looking for a place to give birth. The male was nowhere to be found, and judging from the fact that the female's body was full of injuries, it seems that the conclusion was it had indeed lost in a territorial war and been chased down the mountain. The earl and his party had discovered the draconis's nesting spot when they headed out to protect the village in question, but the draconis in question seems to have passed away while giving birth, leaving behind four baby draconis.

Since the draconis is an extremely intelligent monster, if they are trained before they mature and get used to people, it seems that they can be tamed.

There's been no actual examples of this for the past two hundred years, but since it seems to have occurred once before, the story has been passed down. Because of my father, my domain used to have the worst public order in the land, in order to keep the peace, Earl Terejia had moved his personal forces here as well, and it seems that even if people did poorly in training the punishment would be light. From the kingdom east of the Kaldia domain, there was a forest filled with monsters, and snow snakes would often come down from the nearby Amon Nor Mountains as well, so it wasn't uncommon that there would sometimes be losses to some livestock. Since the draconis's main prey was snow snakes, Earl Terejia decided to see if a draconis could be successfully raised to be used for the sake of my domain. I had no objections.

Out of the four baby draconis, three had been sent over to Fort Jugfena, which also borders the neighboring eastern country like us. The last one was being held in Earl Terejia's waist, and it was sucking on dog milk that had been soaked in a cotton cloth. Seeing the earl and his rugged face taking care of the draconis as if it were a puppy was quite a surreal sight to behold, I was completely lost for words when I had ran out to and arrived at the garden.

Without minding the fact that I had a blank look on my face with my mouth wide agape, the earl simply explained what had happened, and he told me quite frankly why he had called me over.

“Eliza, you’re going to be this draconis’s master. Take care of it properly every day, in order to get it used to you.”

“I understand.”

During my conversation with the earl, I only had about two seconds of time to be confused about it all. Since he had just explained the situation to me, my reply was immediate. My head which wasn’t working quite yet decided on its own to agree for me, it’s probably better evidence than anything of the training I’ve received as a noble girl.

With the aid of Mrs. Marshan who had quite a wide breadth of common sense and knowledge, I decided to give my astonishingly rare pet the name of Rashiok. It’s the name of the ancient sun god that was worshiped here in the Jugfena region. It’s now just an obscure fairy tale, in which the sun in the story claimed this name as its own. Once, a mouse took a bite out of Rashiok’s cheese sun, but the weakened sun will still help people in their time of need, is what I remembered Mrs. Galton saying before.

Mrs. Galton had been born somewhere in the south southwest of Arxia, I figured it would have been around the Greenfield region, but she really knows the Jugfena region’s fairy tales quite well…… Well, because Mrs. Galton has quite a serious personality, she might have specially looked into the fairy tales here in order to adapt better to this region and show her commitment.

Rashiok was a baby draconis that had just been born.

Three months later after all the commotion from his arrival, Rashiok finally became able to open his thin eyelids. He would nudge me with his tiny nose whenever he wanted milk, and press against the cotton wool filled with milk with small, awkward movements, and whenever he saw something he would first point his not at all dangerous seeming nose towards it, it seems that the soldier in training Kamil who shared some of the responsibilities for raising him with me felt some regret towards this last part.

“Even though he seems so cute……”

“Will he still be like that even after he grows up?”

“Everything is cute when they’re small, Charlie. Even though Charlie is a chibi, you don’t understand the cuteness of small things, you must have lacked something while you were growing up……”

For some reason that I don’t understand, Kamil would always call me Charlie. I am a respectable noble with the title of viscount after all, so I tried to get the reason out of him, but he still wouldn’t tell me. Really, what a rude fellow. I’ll forgive any irreverence wherever there’s nobody else around, but it might have been a mistake to say that to him in the first place. Since he was to be my partner in this and I would be seeing his face every day, I thought it would be too bothersome if he was always respectful towards me and obeyed orders, but this……

“Because young ones are able to obtain the love of those around them while they’re still small, it means that it’s just a type of defense mechanism.”

“Charlie’s not cute at all when you say things like that.”

And so Kamil shook his head and sighed, seeming to lament something, when I heard the whistling sound of the maidservant Mary from the corridor to the garden. Since she was interested in our conversations, she would often listen in from time to time and laugh in amusement. I wonder if I should wish for a change of pace or some rest from this daily work I do. I don’t really mind being listened in on that much, but from time to time I’d like to listen in on something interesting as well.

“If it’s just like that children’s song, I think that Rashiok might be able to move around by himself by the next full moon.”

“A draconis that was just born, will open its eyes during the night, and will run about and play during the evening, and will leave its nest during the night after three months. Counting the moons since Rashiok’s been born, and the way he’s been opening his eyes, it seems that everything in the song was correct after all.”

“There’s always been a legend around here of a draconis being a loyal guardian once, it unexpectedly turned out to be true.”

As Kamil got lost in his interest towards the draconis, I looked straight into Rashiok’s golden pupils. In another ten days, this tiny creature will be able to move around on its own……

To me, who had just been a baby, feeling like a pet to other humans while my destiny remained far away from me, I had fun watching his growth every day, because he didn't have sight while young he seemed so cute and yet so lonely. I definitely won't mistreat him, and my feelings just happened to match up with Kamil's on this matter.

Chapter 5
This is basic training

"Don't leave your side open!"

In tandem with the unforgiving angry voice, my wooden sword was knocked out of my hands. My sparring partner Gunther, would not go easy on me at all. While holding my wrist which was numb from the shock still, I thanked him politely.

Rashiok has grown to the point where it's fine even if I'm not watching him at all times anymore, it's now late summer. The barracks being built for the domain's troops next to the Mansion of Golden Hills has been completed, Earl Terejia had organized the troops he had hired along with the original soldiers from my domain here. It's quite some building they've finished here…… It feels like just not long ago I was still watching its construction from my window.

Right after the troops moved into the barracks, for some reason the earl had me start learning martial arts. In order to drill the foundations of how to use the sword and spear into me, a three month soldier in training course (for a noble) has been prepared especially for me.

But really, I'm supposed to be a girl. I'm wondering if Earl Terejia has perhaps happened to forget my gender.

It's probably a standard part of noble education so there's nothing strange about this. There's no problem with this, but…… A different problem is that I feel like my life may be in danger now.

After I thought about it for a bit, I decided to do it.

This barracks was decided upon in order to allow the Kaldia domain's troops to stay here at all times. Since it's the Kaldia domain's troops, of course they were mostly my domain's people. Meaning, among them were still people that hated my father's blood to the point of wanting to boil him alive. Of course, they would include me in their targets to hate as well. They hate me simply because of my heritage…… Those kinds of uncouth fellows.

I went out from the mansion for the first time. For grave crimes, the place where you would get quartered became my first memory of a place I visited outside the mansion, so I wondered if there was such a thing as karma, just how bad my karma would be currently.

Something even worse, is that more than half of my domain's troops were originally bandits. I wonder if I'll really make it to the end of my three month training alive.

At least Kamil and Rashiok are with me as my caretaker and pet but, if I'm spoiled too much by Kamil it'll probably cause my head to be separated from my body soon down the road, so I hurriedly dragged out my skills for self sufficiency from my previous life that I had almost forgotten by now after reincarnating.

"March ten laps around here, and don't you dare slack off!"

"Yes!"

"Do you remember how many times I've said it already, use your voice from the stomach when you reply!"

"Yes! I'm sorry!"

The jeers finally stopped after a while, well it could be worse.

I had always been confined to a gilded cage and raised delicately until now, but this training to me caused me to throw up every night and become completely covered in sweat and sand and mud, although it's difficult to describe completely with just words.

Although my breakfast and light meal for lunch were properly prepared for me by the troops, at night I was supposed to provide for myself. It seems to be common training for improving survival ability while on the battleground.

Night in the Kaldia domain is long for lower-ranked soldiers that don't even get candles. Since I'm also throwing up my food during training, at night my hunger would never, never end, but because my own weakness is the cause, I desperately searched for anything edible at all that I could gather. In my previous life I never wanted for food, and in this life I was born and raised in a noble family that didn't lack resources either, so I've never known until now just how painful an empty stomach could be.

It was good that Rashiok was allowed to help me, since searching for edible food with a five year old's abilities was a bit beyond me. Rashiok was beginning to grow scales, and was the size of a small dog, and would roll around and enjoy our hunt for food. After I returned to the barracks, the "food" I collected would be checked for edibility, an actual soldier in training would have to check for poisons themselves, so it seems I was given preferential treatment in this.

Of course, I was at least properly taught about the poisons that could cause immediate death.

Although my stomach feels like it's breaking every night, and even blowing bubbles at me could topple me over, at least it's still been calm and quiet every time I visit the barracks.

For a powerful country with no wars, it feels like they have an almost strange level of importance attached to the training about food. I wonder if it's a relic from the time when they became bandits because of a lack of food…… How dare them, something must be wrong with their heads. Is it that people's spirits have become soft after developing civilization, or that they made this training for me because something's wrong with them, I wonder which it is.

Because there were many types of poisonous mushrooms, that was the first lesson hammered into my body.

Birds and rabbits are commonly eaten by the people in my domain, but no matter how many times I tried to hunt them with Rashiok, we were unable to catch even one.

There were only frogs with very little to eat on them, I learned that the bigger ones would be under the mud. Their eggs are supposed to be edible, but unfortunately it's not the season for that right now.

The snakes that I could find were all rather large, and I was treated to a snow snake recently. Since they're the main prey for the draconis, its nutritional value must be high.

Most spiders, even the poisonous ones, can be edible when cooked.

Since many herbs are very poisonous and bad for digestion, eating them will be only a last, last resort.

I collected a lot of fruits from various trees, but most were indigestible. Since they would come up again when I threw up exactly the same as when they went in my stomach, I quickly gave up eating these.

What was easiest for me to capture was lizards. The drawback is that lizards must be cooked very well done over a fire in order to prevent parasites, but well, I'm learning now with my own body that humans are truly omnivorous.

Since my hunting results haven't been very good the past few days, the day before yesterday I tried boiling grass in salt water, and yesterday I found an out of season cicada, and tried some of the weeds growing all over the place. It turns out that young pampas grass is actually edible, who would have thought……

"Charlie hasn't been to the river yet, eh. There's always many insects, snakes, and plants there, and if you try hard you might even be able to fish something too."

"That this grubby brat is actually supposed to be a refined noble, ten out of ten people probably wouldn't believe it."

All the soldiers in training are calling me Charlie. Kamil must have spread it without me knowing, or maybe it's an old name for something in this region. I have no idea whatsoever if it's supposed to be derogatory or affectionate. I wonder if they're taking it out on me because I'm a noble girl and they hate the aristocracy, or if they're getting along well with me since we're all comrades that are in this together, sharing similar meals.

Some days their attitudes would be as cold as ice, and some days they would be warm towards me as if I were their own child. Human emotions and feelings are so complicated that I don't understand them even now.

"The river, huh…… Charlie, I think you know this already, but if you go there take Kamil with you."

"That's right. Otherwise you might get lost, and can't find your way back, you'll be crying!"

The men were all treating me as a child with their language, and the soldiers in training were getting each other riled up with their playful banter. Well, it's a fact that I'm technically still a child, so I just nodded without minding what they said, and just

like always, the charm of a lovable child, which these fellows completely lacked, was able to cause most of these guys to fall silent in amazement.

I don't mean to blame anyone but, even though I've adapted to life in the barracks, I still haven't gone out from the land under direct control even once. The land under direct control also included a small patch of woods and a pond. I haven't gone out far enough to the point where the barracks and mansion would no longer be visible, since I had felt that it would be better to stay within vision of adults I could reach just in case some sort of trouble happened.

"Oh, isn't it about time for the kid to go to sleep? You're going to be beaten up by Gunther again early in the morning, you know?"

The oldest soldier in training among the lot, who usually didn't speak up very much, raised his voice, and caused a bout of laughter. After breakfast every day, it was time for everyone to help out in the fields belonging to the area under direct control, other than me who would be useless even if I went to the fields, so I would receive swordsmanship instruction from Gunther, and my sword would be knocked out of my hands dozens of times, and after that I would be receiving training in martial arts and getting beaten up but not to a terrible extent, this has become the usual pattern.

Since I was getting worn out and pushed to the limits by Gunther every day, I could feel the other soldiers becoming slightly less reserved with me. After seeing their enemy's daughter getting beaten up and rolled around in the dirt so much, it's probably a load off their chests.

"That's right. I'll go to sleep now, good night everyone."

I bid them good night politely, then slipped into my bed of straw. The instant I laid down, I could feel my consciousness slipping away from me and I fell asleep immediately.

Chapter 6
Concern about the neighboring country

The stunningly golden wheat, and all the rye as well has been harvested, a silent winter was about to take over from late autumn here in the Kaldia domain. My three month soldier in training course was almost over, and I'm also throwing up much less often than before. Every day, I would walk around with a hoe for plowing that was taller than I was, but for now, it was too big for me to even swing. It's some sort of strange training that's supposed to improve my physical strength and endurance.

It happened one day right before I would return to my life in the mansion from the barracks. In the office of the domain's lord in the Mansion of Golden Hills that I wasn't allowed to step into until I completed my training course, right now I was receiving a personal lesson from Earl Terejia in front of four maps on the national situation.

Earl Terejia has reformed the domain's laws quite a bit, and in particular he wrote all of the laws pertaining to the domain's troops himself. Before he came, it was like we almost didn't even have a standing army. It's because in my father's entourage, as long as about ten people had weapons, that was enough for him to swagger about.

After all, it's stipulated that all the nobles in Arxia are supposed to have their own forces. Of course, basically no countries would want to invade Arxia, the largest country on the continent, and inside the country it's been peaceful as well ever since the kingdom was founded, many lords' armies were there in name only. It's no exaggeration to say that the only ones with decent armies are the earls stationed on the remote borders.

In the time of the Arxia Kingdom's previous incarnation, the Ar Xia Holy Kingdom, we had already abandoned all policies of military aggression towards other countries. Currently, the borders with other countries were closed, and only those with a passport issued by the king were allowed to enter or leave.

We have non-interference peace treaties with other countries, and there are friendly trade agreements to allow merchants with permission from the state to do business and international trade. Our country basically practices isolationism.

As for the overall situation in the continent, the rise and fall of nations occurs very often with high intensity. The countries apart from the Arxia Kingdom are basically always on alert and vigilant for war.

Arxia Kingdom is able to remain at peace largely in part because the other countries haven't been able to develop beyond anything more than small countries. The power struggles between countries of similar strengths is keeping them busy, so none of them have the time to even do anything about the major power Arxia.

Among all this, as for why Earl Terejia has been raising an army in the Kaldia domain, of course there's a reason for it. It's to guard against the countries in the east.

"The Rindarl Union Dukedom, is it?"

"They might be changing their name to Rindarl Empire soon."

To the east of the Arxia Kingdom, four countries have been expanding their territory for the past hundred years. It's an alliance between the countries of Densel, Planates, Giograd, and Parmigran.

Originally, there had been a country called the Rindarl Kingdom that ruled over the northeastern part of this continent, but it split into north, south, east, and west, each ruled over by a duke, and each dukedom ended up attracting many people similar to the duke of each country, thus becoming their own separate countries with individualistic traits.

Some time recently, there had been a movement to reunify the four dukedoms and to nominate an archduke as the leader of the four dukedoms. With that many people under their rule combined, it wouldn't be strange if they changed their name to the Rindarl Empire.

Right now, the four dukedoms are small countries compared with Arxia, but if they combine and become one country then they will become a great power comparable to Arxia. If another country with similar power is born, then the predominant position that Arxia has held onto for so long might be no more. Depending on the actions from the Rindarl side, a war between the two countries may very well be possible.

"Between the Kaldia domain and the country of Densel, there's only the Jugfena royal domain. If a battle with Rindarl begins, not only would you be ordered to the front lines, it wouldn't matter even if you had no combat skills."

Earl Terejia explained everything clearly and in extreme detail to me, while he marked places for me on the maps showing the northern part of the continent and the Arxia Kingdom.

With Rindarl uniting together, that would completely change the power balance in the north. Arxia would be affected the most directly, which is why secretly, the Kaldia domain would have to take heed and be on guard as we were located in the east of Arxia and close to the border.

Because I still hadn't learned much yet from Mrs. Marshan on Arxia's politics, Earl Terejia had to explain everything to me in great detail. Even though I had arrived at the office during the morning, it was already time to have a light lunch after the earl finally arrived at the main topic.

"What I just told you about Rindarl, you should think on it a bit yourself as well. At least, right after your upcoming sixth birthday celebrations are over. It's good to be prepared early."

Earl Terejia moved onto the main issue. First, he picked up a detailed map of the north, pointing out the borders of the Jugfena royal domain and the Densel Dukedom.

"Do you know about Fort Jugfena that's been built along our national border?"

"Yes."

It's the fort where Rashiok's siblings are being raised. To the east, there's a forest known as the Monster Forest, and it's also a major export location for the grain produced by the Kaldia domain. Since it's not open ground and we have to go around the Monster Forest to get there, I've heard it would take about four days to get there on horseback.

The earl pointed his finger at the northeastern part of the royal domain. He drew a circle close to the southern tip of the Bandishia Plateau, and kept tapping it.

"Do you know about the nomads?"

"They're tribes of people that raise livestock and periodically roam. Is that correct?"

"That's mostly correct. South of the Bandishia Plateau, is a nomad tribe called the Shiru tribe. They should technically belong to the kingdom of Artolas, but because

Densel has conquered Artolas, they're resisting against Densel together with some of the farmers from the border."

The earl pulled out the oldest map out of the four maps he had prepared, and showed me the area that used to be the former empire of Artolas. It's a country that used to contain the eastern half of the Amon Nor Mountains, as well as the Bandishia Plateau. Its capital Remeshu had been located in the northern plateaus, but after it fell to Densel, now it's become part of Densel's territory.

Artolas had originally been founded as a country for the Artolas people, and this included the Shiru tribe, and the farmers around the region had been accepted into the former country of Artolas as well, is what the earl explained to me.

"Since Densel now controls the farmland to the east, the Shiru tribe has been gradually moving westward. Right underneath the plateau, in the royal domain is where battle between the Shiru tribe and Densel will most likely begin. It's because that entire area is wide open plains. Actually, it's been reported to the House of Lords that the Shiru tribe and the farmers together with them would like to be accepted as refugees by Fort Jugfena."

Since the Shiru tribe has less than one in ten thousand odds of winning, if Rindarl unites together successfully then it's extremely unlikely that Densel will stand for leaving them alone. It's been five years since the name Artolas has been erased from the maps. Since the Shiru tribe has resisted Densel unsuccessfully for all this time, it's very unlikely that they'll now be accepted as citizens of Densel.

"Densel intends to wipe out the Shiru tribe, and the Shiru tribe knows that they can't resist them…… is that what's going on?"

"That's right. At this late hour, surrender is no longer an option open to them. However, although the Shiru tribe are few in number, they are excellent equestrians. It's difficult to imagine that they will be completely wiped out before they reach Arxia."

With the fort so close to them, the Shiru tribe would definitely fight their very hardest – if that's the case, Arxia might not be able to say it's unrelated. The leaders in the Jugfena royal domain should think really hard about whether to intervene.

"The leader of a domain's armies is the lord of a domain. That means you, Eliza."

Because I've inherited the title of Viscountess as a member of the Kaldia family, that also means taking on the responsibilities that come with it. The Arxian royalty and nobility that had gotten complacent in an era of peace, didn't treat the talk of Rindarl uniting together seriously four years ago, when I had just inherited my title.

"It's fine to leave command decisions on the battlefield to General Calvin, but at a very minimum you will have to be present in the fort. If defense of the fort becomes necessary for whatever reason, know that you yourself may also be required to take up arms for self defense. After you end your time in the barracks tomorrow, I will begin teaching you how to ride a horse."

There was no room for me to agree or disagree with anything. I've always thought that the concept known as war was very far from me, but in actuality it was so close already, I looked silently into Earl Terejia's eyes, and could only respond by nodding.

Chapter 7
Returning from the barracks

Due to Earl Terejia's financial support, the military barracks constructed here had a large bath installed in it as well.

The bath was simple in construction, two types of water tanks were lined up against the walls, and either hot water or regular water would come down from them. The water source was the pond, benefitting me greatly, and its heat source was the kitchen stove. There was plenty of steam rising from the hot water section, so I might even be able to call it a steam bath.

For bathing, we would use a washbasin and a hand pail. Wait until the water in the hand pail is at an appropriate temperature, and then use that to wash my body with. For the sake of injured soldiers with open wounds, lavender has also been put into the water tank, as a way of disinfecting the water.

Since I used to often throw up over myself as a soldier in training, I would usually have to visit this bath twice a day.

"Today's my final farewell to this bath, eh……"

Today's the last day of my three months in the barracks. It was a long time, but it also happened in the blink of an eye. I squeezed out the water that was soaking into my bathrobe, making it heavy, in order to help calm myself down. The bathrobe's thickness was enough so that it wouldn't be transparent after it got wet, but that also made it somewhat inconvenient. But after all, I can't let myself be bathing in the buff here. I'm almost six years old and should have nothing to worry about, but this is the original me speaking. It also seems that nobles are supposed to keep up proper appearances at all times.

"If you want to do something that a viscountess should be doing, make a large bath in the village, Charlie."

While washing my hair, I replied to Kamil's request halfheartedly with a "I'll consider it." I wondered exactly how much it would cost, but since I'm not privy to the financial situation or budget of my domain now, I have no idea how to calculate it out.

“I don’t think it should be all that difficult if you base it off the bath in Pactoshiki.”

“How am I supposed to use that as a reference. On top of only you knowing about that place, just exactly how much about that place do you even remember?”

The place that Kamil had just mentioned was a country far, far to the south. I wonder just exactly how many people in Arxia even know the name Pactoshiki. Because Mrs. Marshan is so knowledgeable about many things, that’s why I learned the name of this place as well from her, but why does Kamil know about a far away obscure place like this.

“Well, you have a point. Because my father was from there, he taught me about it in detail.”

While laughing loudly, Kamil suddenly poured a pail of hot water on me. A large amount of the water splashed on my face, and when I glared at him reflexively, he looked back at me with a feminine seeming face and an innocent expression as if he didn’t do anything. This bastard, he’s feigning ignorance, even though he just splashed water on me, now you’ve done it! Without any maturity at all, I returned the favor by throwing all the water in my own washbasin at him.

“You damned bastard, using your washbasin is unfair!”

“It’s because Charlie started it!”

“The one who started splashing with water was you!”

The shouting and shrieking lasted for only a few seconds. A merciless fist descended on my head from above, and I saw stars in front of my eyes.

“You’re annoying, you stupid brats.”

The fist belonged to Gunther who had come in to bathe without me realizing it. There was a visible vein popping on his forehead, and his irritated voice resounded throughout the bath. As a military leader known for not going easy even on the youngest soldiers, and with an imposing aura to go along with his status…… He, he was, absolutely terrifying.

“S, sorry.”

“This raggedy brat thinking she’s going to be returning to a noble’s life tomorrow, how thickheaded can you be. You better not get soft on me. I’m still going to be in charge of your training tomorrow as well.”

I involuntarily looked at Gunther with a shocked, idiotic expression on my face. From tomorrow as well, I wonder if that means he’s going to officially become my martial arts instructor. But I had heard from Earl Terejia that I would be beginning to learn ceremonial swordsmanship befitting a noble. Kamil next to me, despite the fact that he had been horsing around just a moment ago, somehow seemed to be quite relaxed already as he asked me in a raised voice.

“Oi, what’s with your face.”

“Gunther-san, are you able to use swordsmanship for nobles?”

“Hah? Is that sort of thing even useful? ……Ah, someone seems to have been called from the capital to come teach you pretty swordsmanship.”

So what this means is that…… On top of having to endure Gunther’s grueling training, I’m also going to have a ceremonial swordsmanship instructor. Involuntarily, I became a bit dejected, and Gunther even threatened me with saying “if you dare to make a fool of yourself and throw up in front of whatever weakling noble shows up from the capital, I’ll let you know what death is.”

His facial expression, what is it like, um…… a Nio Guardian? From my previous life’s memories that were fading more and more with each passing day, I suddenly remembered these Buddhist statues. What’s more, way too clearly.

When I returned to the Mansion of Golden Hills the next morning, Mrs. Galton and Mrs. Marshan flew out to meet me. Was it true that I was made a mockery of as a soldier in training! Basically, an extraordinarily menacing atmosphere quickly closed in on me. In a way, it felt even scarier than Gunther’s face earlier.

“I thought maybe you would be able to finally take a break, but to think that ojou-sama still has to go through such things!”

The two of them did nothing but lament over the life I had in the barracks, making a large fuss and crying over it, and even more regretfully, Earl Terejia who had left the mansion earlier to perform a village inspection returned right at this time. No matter what he said to try and comfort the two of them, they would not calm down, what’s

more it was like pouring more fuel onto the fire. How pitiful, how pitiful, they kept repeating this over and over again, but because I myself was satisfied with the results of staying in the barracks, there was quite a large difference in what we thought of it.

“In order to succeed the position of viscountess, I believe that it was necessary for me to learn the proper skills to lead my domain’s troops. Is that so wrong?”

“That’s……”

“Ahh ojou-sama, Eliza-sama, what kind of stupid things are you saying. You’re a girl. It’s inconceivable that you should be leading an army. After graduating from school, you should be getting married immediately, and it’ll be fine if you just leave the work of the domain’s lord to him.”

I’m too tired of this to comfort them, so I spoke bluntly and honestly about my feelings.

Although Mrs. Marshan remained silent, Mrs. Galton only got worse and began countering me. Judging by her distressed expression as if she had just heard something incredibly shocking, she was entirely against the idea of women wielding weapons. I knew that the Kaldia domain’s history considered women here to be only accessories for showing off a man’s power, but I didn’t consider that Mrs. Galton, who came here from another region to have the same type of thoughts as well.

“Please calm down, Mrs. Galton. Indeed, while tradition dictates that the lord’s position is succeeded by a man, and war is also considered to be a man’s job, that doesn’t mean that these things have nothing to do with women. And even Mrs. Marshan has been teaching me some of the topics necessary in consideration that I will eventually officially become the Kaldia domain’s lord.”

“……Yes, that’s right. Although taking up arms is usually a man’s job, and women usually assist their husbands and leave running the domain to them, it might not always be a good thing, Mrs. Galton. The responsibilities that have to be carried out do not distinguish between men and women.”

In Arxia, noble children were educated the same without regards to gender, and since it was required for the nobility to be smarter than the commoners, they would eventually be enrolled in school for compulsory education. However, the royal family has also abolished the position of the queen, and indeed society is ruled by men. But even so, it was allowed for women to inherit noble titles associated with domains, and there are female civil officials that serve in the royal palace as well.

Teaching is also not a profession that is open only to men. To Mrs. Marshan, who has worked as a noble school teacher before for the government as well as currently being employed as my governess, she probably found Mrs. Galton's point of view unacceptable.

"In Greenfield, if a woman works, it's said to be evidence that the man is worthless!"

"That's not the case in the royal capital. After all, women aren't merely men's accessories."

"……Since the matter at question is about me, please don't quarrel. Regardless, isn't arguing like this considered disgraceful for women?"

While I do think that Mrs. Marshan was finally able to placate Mrs. Galton successfully, I feel a little left out even though it was all about me in the first place. Since Earl Terejia and even his secretary Bellway had left again in order to work on reinforcing the army, if things had gotten any more heated up I wouldn't have known what to do. Since the two women had been glaring at each other during Mrs. Marshan's lecture, finally the issue seems to have settled down a bit on the surface.

"I'm not going to argue any more on this matter, but I'll definitely be having a word with the earl-sama about ojou-sama."

Although Mrs. Galton still seemed to bear a grudge and had to have the last word, the one who had originally tossed me into the barracks was also the earl in question. I can obviously see that it will be fruitless for her to speak to him, but I couldn't say that. If the earl personally refutes Mrs. Galton, then she'll probably have nothing more to say.

Chapter 8
One day during winter

Winter in the Kaldia domain is very cold. Although the weather is mild from spring through autumn, since we're south of the highest mountain range here, the Amon Nor Mountains, temperatures fall sharply during winter. Especially to the northeast, the river will freeze over as well.

Since the Kaldia domain runs longer east to west, it's usually split into the southwestern and northeastern sections, and the villages are concentrated more in the southwestern section where there are many gently rolling hills.

In the northeast there are many small lakes and rivers, but right now there's an issue of how to best make use of them. In the past, it seems that people were able to fish successfully here, but because of father's despotic policies, forcing people to work in the fields, currently the northeast is mostly pristine, untouched land.

Since Earl Terejia didn't want to just leave this land alone, he recently decided to try and do something with it, but just building up entire villages seems to be difficult. Since the northeast is closer to the mountains, many beasts will be coming down from the mountains during the winter, taking that into consideration it's a difficult location for people to be living in.

"During winter, Rashiok sure is energetic."

During my daily routine of walking Rashiok, Kamil smiled while he applied a hot bottle of tea to his cheek. I wonder if it was really that fun to sink his feet into the snow, Rashiok was flying about and jumping around on the hillside that had become completely covered in snow. Since the snow snakes which are his main source of food hibernate during the winter, I wonder if that causes him to be the most active during the winter.

The snow that had been falling for the past two days was so soft and smooth, that it was difficult to walk. The woolen cloak I have to wear to protect against the cold is also annoying. It was already rather heavy since it reached all the way down to my knees, but since water from the snow was getting caught in the hems it became even heavier.

It's good that Rashiok seemed to be having so much fun, but today was cloudy and dim and the ground was slippery, and I'm really fed up with this biting cold. It's the first time since I've reincarnated that I've experienced the winter outside, and I quickly assessed that I wasn't going to get accustomed to this.

Since the grain had been harvested, there was nothing other than the mansion and barracks to obstruct my vision, and the snow-covered, silent hills created quite the lonesome scenery. While chasing Rashiok and creasing my eyebrows because my eyes were smarting from the cold, Kamil would occasionally stop me from time to time if it seemed like I was about to accidentally leave the area under direct control. Because there was no signs or marks, it was hard to keep good track of distance.

"It's cold……"

"It's fine to walk Rashiok for a little bit more. When we return, Nathan should have boiled eggs and soup prepared for us."

Reflexively I had complained a little about the cold to Kamil. As the son of a large merchant that had been to many other countries, he's surprisingly good at calming people down. I feel it must be the merchant blood in him.

It's very regrettable that his father the merchant has already passed away. That's because Arxians with information on other cultures are few and far between. It would have been nice if I could have heard stories about other countries as well, is what I thought, but there's no helping it. Since Kamil had been too young at the time, it seems that he's forgotten most of the stories about other countries. What bad luck.

"There's even boiled eggs, eh. How luxurious."

"It seems like Claria village bought some chickens from the Henznaut domain this year. If they breed them successfully, you'll be able to have boiled eggs more often next year."

"Ahh, I see."

From time to time, Kamil was also able to share information with me that I did not know. He had originally been assigned to me from the domain's army in order to help me take care of Rashiok and be my personal bodyguard, and after all this time being with him it seems that he's actually a nice guy after all. Maybe it's because he's an excellent conversationalist, good at making idle chatter and gossip.

In the Jugfena region, boiled eggs are supposed to represent providence, so they were usually supposed to be eaten on religious holidays. Unfortunately, the Kaldia domain has currently lost most of its knowledge on livestock breeding due to my father's fault.

We had been relying on imports from other domains up until now, but this year, starting with chickens, we were beginning to re-establish our own supply of livestock. The plan for next year is to begin seeing what fish we can gather from the rivers and lakes in the northeast. The other project is to start seeing if we can begin to have the people in our domain raise crops other than grains.

"……Charlie? Did you start praying all of a sudden or something?"

"It's because I was welcoming the chickens that are being imported to my domain. Is that so strange?"

"Ahh, I guess it's fine. Charlie must be very pious."

I shrugged in response to Kamil's eyes which still had some wondering to them. Prayer, is usually supposed to be offered in respect to the gods, but the only one I'm thankful to is Earl Terejia. Unlike what Kamil said, I'm actually not a devout member of the Ar Xia church. After all, I don't believe in anything like the existence of gods at all.

I had only stopped to think for a few seconds, but before I realized it Rashiok had already gotten several meters ahead of me. I hurriedly ran to catch up. Even if Rashiok can be a bit errant, he's pretty smart and can find his way back to the mansion on his own, but if we returned to the mansion without him we would certainly be lectured by the earl.

Without paying heed to us, Rashiok who had been playing around suddenly stopped. He plunged his nose into the snow, and was sniffing something. I wonder what he could have found. Then, he suddenly retreated and headed towards us while barking furiously, running through the snow with amazing momentum.

"I wonder what happened."

"Maybe he's found something that can be food? On a hunt before, I've seen the ground move like that once, it had been a rizer."

"Eh, rizer!?"

Kamil's voice suddenly became greatly frenzied. Well, that's to be expected. The rizer is said to be closer related to a mouse than a mole, and it's a type of gigantic lizard that lives underground. It's also considered extremely valuable both as food, and as materials for creating weapons and armor.

"Come to think of it, unluckily you weren't there with me at that time. Because of that, two rizers got away last time."

"Two escaped!? What a waste!!"

"How do you expect me to catch a lizard that's even bigger than I am? With my strength, I couldn't even pierce one with a spear."

"Well, that's true, but……"

While we were busy arguing, Rashiok had been single-mindedly digging in the snow. Without hesitation, I used my hands which were covered in leather gloves to begin digging too. At seeing this, Kamil said "something like a noble girl digging around in the snow……" but right now it's getting to the good part, so I can't stop. Besides, no matter where you look in Arxia, where would you find a noble that's eaten spiders before?

After he joined me as well in digging together with Rashiok, progress went pretty fast. The soil was dug up in a few minutes, and the frozen earth beneath that took another several minutes. Then, my leather gloves touched the hard scales of a hibernating rizer.

"It's here."

We dug up all around it until we could see all of it, and carefully examined our prey.

"……It's pretty big. I think it's about six feet long."

"Let's kill it now that we've dug it up."

As soon as I said so, Kamil pulled out his sword from his waist, and accurately pierced through the rizer's head with a single stab. I was a little involuntarily stunned as I looked at Kamil. The head had been sliced clean off the rizer. It should have been very difficult to kill the rizer off with a single attack. After all, his sword is heavy. If he goes too slowly, the sword might shake, and if he swung too fast the sword's weight might

have caused it to go off-track. That's why it's surprising that Kamil seems to have done it so easily. I don't think even Gunther has this level of swordsmanship.

"You're surprisingly good at swordsmanship."

At seeing me staring at him, Kamil laughed with an ambiguous expression on his face. From what I could see, he was merely feigning ignorance yet again.

Chapter 9
I received a horse



(This is Eliza when she's young, at six years old. However, it's a little rough because I drew it in a hurry…… I think this hardened look is probably her most typical expression. She's wearing the typical tunic and dalmatic that's standard casual wear in her domain.) – Author's note

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With the coming of spring, it's become a bit busier here at the Mansion of Golden Hills. It's going to be my first birthday celebration in four years.

In the Arxia Kingdom, one's birthday is supposed to be celebrated only during three certain times a year. After the fields are planted in the spring, during the next full moon after a religious holiday in the summer, or after the autumn harvest. Since I had been born during the end of winter, my birthday would be celebrated after the fields were planted in spring.

Although in my previous life I didn't really care about birthdays one way or the other, since the lord's birthday is supposed to be celebrated by the entire domain, or simply speaking, it's supposed to be an event to please the people in my domain. Under the pretext of celebrating, it's also a way to hand out food, wine, and candy to my people.

So that the people have their fun, it's going to continue for an entire three days, and even though it's rather bothersome to me, as the leading role I have to pretend to enjoy it.

It seems that Earl Terejia is preparing most of my birthday celebration. Recently, I've had more opportunities to see him working up close. I'm actually wondering if it should be considered abuse of the elderly because I can't help with the work yet. I would be very troubled if he dies from overwork now……

In the first place, after he came here and became my regent, he's worked so hard for the sake of stabilizing my domain in order to pass on to me later. I wondered if it was really necessary to work so hard to the extent of wearing out his body. I know that he's a bit mercenary and calculating, but no matter what, Earl Terejia has been a great help in rebuilding and reviving the Kaldia domain for me. I really wouldn't know what to do if he were to be crushed under his workload.

Having said that, I don't have the ability to take over his job just yet, nor is there anyone else that can assist him, so all I can do for now is cheer him on, meaning other than obediently receiving the education he prepares for me, I have nothing else I can do.

As for the education he's gifted me, the thing that stands out the most is equestrianism. Recently on the continent, strategies revolving around the use of cavalry have been evolving rapidly. Warhorses specially prepared for military use have been improved as well, it's because of the recent invention of the easy to use leather stirrup becoming widespread. Large scale infantry combat tactics have been established since seven hundred years ago, while riding a horse was originally allowed to only military commanders, the nobles have begun to study cavalry tactics and incorporate cavalry soldiers in order to improve their armies.

By the way, it seems that battles up until seven hundred years ago used to be leaderless groups of people battling other leaderless groups of people to the death. What's more, the icing on the cake is that the first recorded army in history had been organized over two thousand years ago by the ancient King Iruhan of Injatoliska.

Injatoliska had been destroyed long before an actual organized military system became widespread seven hundred years ago, when the Ar Xia Holy Kingdom invented a chain of command system for the sake of national defense which replaced the leaderless mob battles that had been common up until then.

Well, enough gossip.

Since the Arxia Kingdom specializes in defensive war, that's why the kingdom's policy is to avoid war.

To begin with, the sea is to the north and west of Arxia, the southwest has the Amon Karan Mountains and the northeast has the Amon Nor Mountains that have become our national borders, so of course there would be little need for cavalry troops in the army. The current situation here in the southeastern part of Arxia, is that the Jugfena royal domain, Margrave Genas's domain, Earl Ruktoferd's domain, and the Freche domains are the only ones that have small cavalry troops. For various reasons, it seems that the House of Lords has been planning the expansion of armaments in the Jugfena region.

And in the Kaldia domain, since its army had been practically nonexistent, it seems that it's been approved for us to attempt training cavalry troops on an experimental basis.

Earl Terejia having been so passionate about strengthening my domain's army, probably was because he knew about the expansion of armaments in the Jugfena region and the approval for the Kaldia domain to train cavalry troops. What a frightening person……

Right when winter had begun, the House of Lords had decided to provide my domain with three warhorses to start with. It was scheduled for thirty more warhorses to be deployed next year. And so, sixty members of the army, would be divided into two platoons, and half of them would be used as cavalry soldiers at any time.

One of the three horses that had already arrived, a relatively smaller gelding, was for my training. The other two horses were given to the high ranked military officers Calvin and Agil, that had been chosen to lead the cavalry troops. The horsemanship teacher that had been prepared for me was a retired former cavalry soldier from Earl Ruktoferd's domain, and if he had time Earl Terejia would also sometimes personally teach me the best he could. Training for Rashiok who had yet to mature also began so I could ride him in the future, but because his intelligence was extremely high it seems like very little training was necessary.

"Alright, this is fine."

It's two days after the full moon in the first month of the year. After the end of the day's riding lessons, Earl Terejia made a sign of approval. My sixth birthday's celebration is about one month away, it seems that it will begin flashily with me leading my domain's troops on horseback around the villages. I still can't ride on Rashiok yet as of right now, so for this time's celebration it seems that he will have to stay quietly in the mansion while the celebrations are going on.

"Thank you very much."

Even though he was so busy, Earl Terejia was very passionate about teaching me how to control a horse. He's dedicating this much time to teaching me all in order so that my skills can improve enough to the point of adequacy by the time of my birthday celebration. Since I passed today successfully, I started thinking about things and my head naturally fell lower.

Then, I felt a hand patting me on the head for one short moment. Ah, when I realized it and lifted my head, Earl Terejia's back was already departing from my sight.

When I returned to my room, Rashiok was laying on the floor by my bed relaxedly. Although I thought it was rare since he had always been playing by the pond recently, when I think a little more about it he does intrude here quite often too.

"You, came in here without permission again…… Huh?"

Since this smart creature can easily open doors, I wasn't surprised at all to see him here at first. But, something was different today. Something that seemed like his skin was flaking off was on the floor by Rashiok.

"W, what's this? Are you sick?"

Rashiok himself seemed to have a nonchalant expression, but I wonder if he's suffering from some skin disease. I immediately made sure that there were no abnormalities in his smooth, scaly skin. His glossy scales were unscratched and beautiful, and if it wasn't for the layer of skin on the floor around him I'd think it ridiculous that he was sick.

Because I had no idea what to do, I called for "Doctor" Kamil. It's best if I ask about something like this from him as quickly as possible.

“I came because I heard that Rashiok might be ill…… Charlie, he’s just molting.”

After that, saying something about how worried the expression on my face was, he couldn’t hold his laughter in anymore and exploded into laughter, holding his belly and slapping his knees, what a rude fellow. Although I said that I’d forgive his irreverence before, why is it that this guy is always inciting my irritation to the maximum level. To the point of even slapping your knees, don’t you know the damage you’re doing to me, as I got angrier.

But anyways, so it was just molting. I had completely forgotten about the fact that snakes and lizards would go through molting. Since the draconis is mostly wolfen, I had never considered that he would need to go through molting like a lizard. Come to think of it, he has become whiter recently. Since he’s been left alone to do as he liked in the garden these past few days, I hadn’t seen him closely recently, but now I remember that he did look a little different when seeing him from afar.

“It’s fine it’s fine, this is evidence that Rashiok is maturing properly. A draconis will begin molting when its body begins to grow. Anyways…… if the stories are correct, Rashiok will eventually reach over three times his current size. He might be too difficult to use when he’s that big, huh……”

Indeed, it was already impossible to find dogs that were larger than Rashiok was. The cost of raising him has to be outweighed by the benefits. It would be unreasonable for me to raise him only as a pet. Rashiok is currently now large enough for me to ride on him without any problems.

“I wonder if it’s possible to create a draconis rider team, on the scale of a small squad.”

“That, would probably be very inefficient.”

“But if I’m able to fly on a draconis, I’ll be able to secure air superiority.”

“Eh, huh? What is that?”

Kamil tilted his head with a puzzled expression on his face, but I pretended not to hear him. Air superiority, is what I had just said, but truth be told I don’t understand the term all that well myself.

My previous life’s memories were fading bit by bit. Maybe it’s because my father’s no longer alive, so I don’t really mind, but if I sometimes let a word slip out that people don’t understand, it could be a problem.

Chapter 10
Marching training

Did you know that the foundations of basic military training are equivalent to marching training? During my three months of living in the barracks, I had trained in this for hours and hours every day. The amount was so unbelievable that I want to throw up blood at the very thought of how much it was every day……

"Oi brat, your eyes are dead."

The relentless verbal abuse from Gunther marching next to me barely managed to reach me. I had gotten lost in thought during training for a moment, at his sound I quickly corrected my posture and improved my awareness.

There's still two full moons until my birthday celebration, I'm now working hard at training for leading the domain's army. Since I had to pay attention to both my horse and Rashiok, if I let my attention slip for even a little bit I would fall off from my horse. Today I'm not riding a small gelding for practice, but a large stallion. I had to concentrate with all my might to keep the stallion in ranks with the marching soldiers.

"It'll be better if you loosen the tension in your shoulder slightly. If the horse thinks you're scared, it'll look down on you."

"Yes."

Earl Terejia who was supervising the march rode up to me and offered a suggestion. Even though his horse was so quiet, mine was completely restless and shaking his head about. Since it would still be the same even if I swapped horses with the earl, it's simply a matter of my lacking riding skills. It's only natural, since I think it's ridiculous to expect a six year old to be able to control a warhorse in active service, but……

To lead, I have to often give my horse directions to turn left, right, or stop, further increasing the difficulty level. Soldiers were escorting me to the front, left, and right, and behind me were forty soldiers in rank and file. It was also hard to match their timing. I wish this was only a marching band.

……I wonder why I suddenly remembered such a thing. I have no idea how memory recollection works.

We arrived at our target location, and then began heading back towards the Mansion of Golden Hills in order to restock up on our water supply. Because we had already made three round trips, both people and horses were at their limits, when the earl dismissed us it seemed like everyone half collapsed, it was like we were all crawling back to the barracks. But even so we're going to have to get ready for this all over again tomorrow, what actual soldiers do is really quite amazing.

"Welcome back."

I was greeted by Kamil who had left during our second round trip to run errands, and right when I entered the mansion, I heard the earl calling for me, saying "when you're done cleaning yourself up and changing, come to the drawing room."

To be called to the drawing room at this time…… There's probably around an eighty percent chance that it's a guest that's come early for my birthday celebration. The other twenty percent is that the earl is having me greet his guest.

I hurriedly wiped down my body, changed my clothes, and fixed my hairstyle as directed, then headed for the drawing room. Since my room had already been well prepared with a washbasin of hot water and a towel and clean clothes in advance, it was nice that I only had to move mechanically like a robot.

"I've made you wait."

"Ahh, perfect timing. The introductions were just finishing up."

Kamil had been waiting for me in front of the drawing room, and after he checked my appearance, he knocked on the door to the drawing room. Eliza-sama has arrived, please enter, the door opened right after that short exchange.

I was immediately ambushed by a strange sensation.

Sitting across from Earl Terejia on a couch for visitors, was an elderly man who looked just like the earl. His clothes, facial expression, and hairstyle were different, but there was no mistaking how similar their features were. In surprise at how alike they looked, I couldn't help looking him up and down.

“Marquis, this here is Viscountess Eliza-dono. Lady Eliza, this here is Senior Marquis Rittergau. He is my older brother.”

The earl smoothly introduced his guest this way. Even though they were relatives and looked alike, I still felt like something was off. I felt like something dangerous I couldn’t see was in the air, perhaps it’s like this between noble relatives.

“I believe this is our first meeting, Viscountess Eliza. My name is Radian Terejia Rittergau.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Marquis Rittergau. Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Eliza Kaldia.”

Compared to the earl who always had a stern look to his face, Marquis Rittergau had a nice smile that made him seem like a good-natured grandfather. – I immediately noticed that his smile seemed to contain something terribly cold. His eyes weren’t smiling in the slightest. As if observing me, he looked over me from top to bottom with his sharp gaze, then he seemed to lose interest in me and looked over at the earl again.

But anyways, so Marquis Rittergau had been Earl Terejia’s older brother. I wonder why I haven’t heard they were related before, as I pulled on my right cheek and thought things over.

Senior Marquis Rittergau. A prestigious noble who was the prime minister of the Arxia Kingdom, as well as the head of the Terejia family. An aristocrat who had been bestowed a name from the king.

……So his younger brother had been the earl. It seems that my guardian has someone quite powerful behind him. Since the Terejia family is a large family with eleven branch families, I had thought that someone who would be sent here to the countryside would have been from one of the minor branch families.

Even though he’s the younger brother of the family head, the earl didn’t set up his own family branch, nor does he have lands of his own despite being so talented, it feels like there’s something to be concerned about if that’s the case. However, I’m not going to simply stick my neck out and pry into the situation. What I should do is leave it alone, since my powers are limited. I don’t even have anything to do with the Terejia family issues to begin with.

Yep, as I nodded to myself and decided upon that in my mind, I listened obediently to the Terejia brothers' conversation. Everything they talked about was something interesting and not boring at all, but the fact that they talked about nothing important whatsoever is what's fearsome about these elderly nobles. There was always a beautiful response to the previous person that wouldn't offend, and there was no place for me in the conversation at all. However, it was very educational for my conversational skills.

As the earl's older brother, Marquis Rittergau's age was considerably shocking in the Arxia Kingdom, and his presence and demeanor were quite powerful. I feel like the upper echelons of Arxian society are making the elderly work too hard. It seems that he's visiting from the royal capital for two days, and that he'll be returning tomorrow.

Although I know that the prime minister probably doesn't have much free time, wouldn't it be better for his body to work a little less and relax a bit, I wonder. Although with the type of person he is, he would probably find that kind of thinking an unnecessary bother.

– That night. Marquis Rittergau, much like his brother had done before, approached me while I was standing by the window. The starry night sky appeared distorted through the thick panes of colorless stained glass.

"Aren't you cold, Viscountess Kaldia?"

Calling me "Viscountess Kaldia" while I didn't know his intentions, just that alone was to enough to make goosebumps run down my flesh and for me to fully tense up.

"It's no problem for me at all. Since I'm still a child, my body temperature is higher. If I get cold, I can just ask my maid to start a fire for me."

"I would be thankful for that. My old bones are weak against the cold."

Even though he said that, Marquis Rittergau showed no signs of intending to leave. I wonder if he has something he wants to discuss with me. Even though I'm only a mere child, does the super big shot Marquis Rittergau have something to say to me?

I can't conceal how tense I am. It's better to let it show, rather than trying to pretend at being natural. Since I'm only a six year old child, he'll probably think something like

“she’s nervous about manners around the important adult.” The marquis wasn’t looking at me though, but rather at the distorted sky outside the window.

“……What do you happen to think that the nobility is?”

He asked me a question after remaining silent for a while. Nobility. In my previous life, it had no longer been important. My fate now though, is that my life is both supported by it and threatened because of it.

So what is nobility, I wonder. What to do, how to do it, and what it is. I want to know about such things too.

“…….I don’t know.”

Although I tried thinking about it for well over ten seconds, I couldn’t think of anything to say that sounded like it fit. After all, my current position is as if it’s floating in space. Like a ghost in society, no matter what I said, there was no weight or power to my words.

“So you’re saying that you recognize your own ignorance? ……How wise of you to know that you do not know. There’s so many countless people that do not realize the ignorance of their own knowledge.”

I also don’t know the answer to that question myself, is what I heard him muttering under his breath.

Chapter 11
My first birthday celebration

It was finally time for my birthday celebration, right when my fatigue had reached its peak from preparing for it every day. Starting from today, for the next three days it'll be hellishly busy until I can finally take a break.

"……Stop laughing constantly."

Among the heavily exhausted mood in the air, there was one bastard who was cheerfully laughing. It was Kamil. He was holding his stomach, laughing at my outfit. It's so annoying, I can't stand it.

"But! ……Ha, hehehehe……"

What a terrible bastard. So annoying. His voice is infuriating, and even covering up the sound of my own thoughts. Because I'm so tired, even the small things are annoying.

But, the reason why Kamil was laughing so hard was because of the irritating outfit I had to wear. Everyone thinks that I look ridiculous so I'm in a bad mood. I wasn't able to choose my own outfit for the celebration, it was something the earl had picked out for me.

My hair was coiled in a bun on top of my head, with casual accessories and I was in elaborate, formal knight wear and a mantle. No matter how you look at it, it's an outfit for boys. Originally, as a respectable girl, I should have been wearing a circlet and bliaud.

"There's no helping it. It's the custom."

Earl Terejia who was next to me said so in a subdued voice. The domain lord had to personally tour the domain while he or she was still a minor for the birthday celebrations. And, for the celebration, the Arxian custom for nobles is to wear formal knight attire. If he hadn't been dead, my father probably would have been wearing this.

Up until now no young girls had ever inherited the domain lord's position, so unfortunately I have become the first ever example. Earl Terejia still dressed me in the customary knightly formal attire…… I guess this means that my birthday celebration will be done as if I were a boy.

It's finally time for me to get on horseback and lead the marching troops. Indeed as Mrs. Marshan had said so before, leading an army really wasn't for women. Also, riding a horse in a dress would be disastrous.

With this taken into consideration, I really don't see why Kamil had been laughing so hard up until now. He doesn't think that this formal attire for boys is unfitting for me. Rather, it's something more like it's too fitting.

"It, it's perfect on you…… Hehehe…… Charlie isn't cute at all…… Hehe."

……It's reversed. It looked much better on me than expected. Is that really so funny? Well, there's hardly any differences between boys and girls when they're six years old, shouldn't it not matter that much what they wear? I feel like I'll never understand in my life just what is it that this guy finds funny.

Our parade that had left early in the morning passed slowly through the villages. The people were quite different from the last time I had seen them, when they were filled with eyes that had wanted to kill my father and his retainers. Although they still seemed quite poor, it was a longs ways off from the unimaginable time when they were nothing but skin and bones with empty eyes. They've improved thanks to the earl.

However, the number of villagers that seemed joyed at seeing me were rather limited in number, I saw quite a few people who didn't even try to conceal how much hatred was in their eyes directed at me.

I guess they still can't forgive the fact that I'm a Kaldia.

I didn't let it affect the smile on my face, and continued leading the parade as I had practiced in training. No matter which village we moved on to, there was a complicated mix of feelings directed at me.

I thought back to when the earl had just constructed the barracks. Now, the soldiers' murderous intent towards me had faded, their attitudes toward me had gradually eased up from the point of seeming to want to tear me apart with their eyes.

Much like that time, the people are taking out their hatred of my father through me. The eyes say what the mouth doesn't, is a phrase I suddenly remembered. Everyone's bitter expressions testified to the veracity of that phrase, as they couldn't forgive me for being the daughter of that cruel, unforgivable domain lord.

However, at the same time, they also seemed to be at a loss for what to do, and had expectations. After all, it was unmistakeable that my guardian Earl Terejia had been the people's savior. Therefore, the domain's people saw not only my father in me, but also the earl. And, because two opposites overlapped, they were lost.

For the domain's soldiers to finally look out for me, it had taken three months before they got used to me. I wonder how long it'll be for my domain's people.

They can't see the work that's being done in the domain lord's mansion. I wonder how long it'll take for my people to approve of me as the domain lord.

Although on the surface it appeared to be glamorous, joyful revelry, on the inside everyone was actually fully tensed up. There was nobody else who was going to relieve the tension. Otherwise, there wouldn't have been a point to the earl's preparing this birthday celebration. I'm a bit amazed at my own wishful thinking, but I still think it's something worth doing.

The final village we were visiting, Cyril village, had a strange kind of tension to it as expected, just like all the other villages. No…… The atmosphere seemed to be heavier in this village, to the point where I could feel like murderous intentions were stabbing at me through the air.

Because Cyril village is the village that's the farthest away from the area under direct control, reconstruction has been the slowest here. In other words, the benevolent influence that the earl had was very limited.

Although the villagers had made a sparse runway of flowers along the parade's path, their expressions seemed more like they were cursing rather than celebrating, it was severely depressing. With the hostility of the villagers, I felt so tense that it gnawed away at me. To them, their hatred towards my father is not merely a thing of the past. It's to the point where it's like a lump lodged in their chests.

"……You alright?"

Kamil beside me was worried about me and asked how I was in a low voice, but I only shook my head slightly in reply. Even though the temperature was still chilly, I had a bad feeling about things and sweat was trickling down along my cheeks to my chin.

“I’ll report to the earl. We need to take a break after leaving this village.”

“Sorry about this.”

Even though my response was an apology, Kamil ignored my ambiguous reply and headed for the soldier ranks in the front where the earl was. I was slightly relieved that Kamil had showed some concern for me, and my breathing had improved without my realizing it from the shallow breaths I was taking earlier.

At that moment, there was a sudden commotion from the people lined up towards the right. Right when I thought something had happened and turned to look, half of my vision turned black from a shadow hurtling towards me.

“Uu!!”

Along with a dull thud, pain ran along my forehead from the shock of the impact. At dealing with something unexpected, my body swayed, and I unconsciously grabbed onto the reins.

Ah, when I remembered it was already too late. Since I had suddenly pulled on the reins, my horse neighed and stood up on its hind legs. I was being shaken about so quickly that I couldn’t see clearly, and soon, my body was midair.

My back slammed into the ground, knocking my breath out of me. I couldn’t breathe due to the impact, and along with a strong ringing in my ears, my consciousness was fading.

A large number of people were shouting something. In my blurry vision, I saw lots of metallic silver from the soldiers glittering around me.

What had happened. A rock had been thrown at me.

Who threw it. The villagers. Someone from Cyril village.

Due to a lack of oxygen, I was panting. The soldiers had drawn their swords. The strained tension from earlier had been completely cut. Both soldiers and villagers were panicking.

Don’t kill them, is what I tried saying. Since I was out of breath, my voice wouldn’t come out. I dug into the dirt with my nails out of impatience.

Don’t kill. Don’t kill anyone. If someone is killed now, a grudge shall remain. I could hear the earl’s voice repeating this many times, although it was muffled and distant.

That’s right. Don’t kill anyone. If anyone is killed here today, all the work that’s been accomplished over the past four years will be destroyed in an instant.

Did my voice come out or not. I don’t know anything else that happened, as I just kept saying don’t kill them over and over again in my mind with my consciousness fading.

Chapter 12
The hatred in their eyes

"- Eliza-sama!!"

As if I had just emerged from underwater, my five senses suddenly became clear all at once. The first thing I saw was Kamil's pale face, then it was the blue sky behind him. At the same time, I heard a dozen people making such a commotion that I couldn't make out anything that was being said.

My head hurts so much. It especially hurts if I move, I wonder if I have a concussion. It's quite possible because I fell off of my horse.

"……Kamil?"

"Nobody's died, or even been injured. With the exception of you. It's because a certain someone was moaning don't kill them so much."

He immediately gave me a straightforward report, probably trying to give me peace of mind. For now, it's enough that I know this much. Kamil wiped my forehead with a wet cloth using his fingertips, and looked at me in silence. I felt as sluggish as if I had just been sprinting with all my might.

I've been transported without me realizing it, I seem to be lying down on a flat stretch of ground close to the river outside of Cyril village. Judging from the position of the sun, it doesn't seem like all that much time has passed.

On top of my heart still beating like crazy, even though I had slammed into my back, I couldn't feel any pain there. Although I had only remained conscious for several seconds after the rock hit my forehead, but leaving the village in all that chaos…… It probably took a minimum of at least ten minutes. I don't know what happened during that time, but it seems like nothing big or shocking occurred.

As if to surround me, soldiers were resting all around me. I could hear the high pitched shrieks of children, but it was too bothersome to turn my neck.

"Ahh, Charlie is really such a blockhead."

“What’s with that, suddenly.”

After he finished wiping down my wounds, Kamil abruptly sighed. In this incident, I wonder if there really had been something I’d done that I’d be called a blockhead.

“You’ve been clawing really hard. This is going to hurt later.”

Kamil pointed at my left hand which he had just wiped as he said so. ……Come to think of it, rather than pain, it does seem like there’s a sense of discomfort. I had probably used too much strength when I was digging into the dirt with my nails earlier. I really don’t have anything to say in response to being called a blockhead, because it was indeed a silly injury.

“I’m going to go wash this cloth. Although the soldiers will be guarding you and you won’t be alone, you definitely can’t just do as you please right now, okay?”

“……Even without you saying that, I can’t even stand up by myself right now. I’ll behave and just rest right here.”

I watched Kamil leave with the cloth, and finally let go of my breath. With my back, fingers, and forehead, the pain was gradually subsiding, and since the chaos in Cyril village had been resolved without a single injury, I was able to breathe a sigh of relief.

When I had fallen off my horse, in combination with their accumulated fatigue and tension, the soldiers had completely lost their direction without leadership.

If they had misused their military power and weapons, they might have affected others not connected to the person who had thrown the rock. If that had happened, the domain would have been endangered. Just because one of the villagers had thrown a rock, that would be no reason to indiscriminately attack the villagers under one’s domain.

After four years of effort by the earl, the energy and willpower that father had sapped from the people was finally returning. However, the people still had a sense of distrust for the nobility, and especially since I was a Kaldia, their hatred for me continued.

The people had survived the hellish man-made disaster wrought by my father, but it wouldn’t be strange at all if they had tried to take revenge on me and kill me, this territory is currently under a very fragile balance.

Really, it's good that nobody was killed. – No, there might be one person that will be killed.

On the other side of the soldiers that were resting, was a child who had been endlessly screaming and trying to escape from his restraints, causing a commotion. Even for the earl, he probably couldn't predict a child's actions. The rash behavior of children was supposed to be suppressed by adults, but not accounting for orphans had been his failure.

By the time Kamil returned, my headache felt slightly better, and I was somehow able to sit up by myself. I stood up borrowing the strength of Kamil's arm, and asked him to take me to the child who was crying and screaming. Although he frowned, Kamil lent me his arm without saying anything.

The one who threw the rock at me had been an orphan boy from Cyril village. The father was unknown, since the mother had gotten pregnant during "forced labor," and the child's mother had been so upset about it that she had committed suicide soon after giving birth.

I forced down my dizziness and nausea, and I looked straight into the child's cloudy eyes. The child's arms were being held down by soldiers, and he was a thin kid in poor shape. The child's malnourished body seemed even younger than me. In his dark eyes, was unconcealable murderous intent and a desperate desire to break free from the adults.

"Did you throw the rock, simply because I'm the daughter of a Kaldia? Or did you have some other reason?"

"Why would there be any other reason!? It would have been better if you'd died as well four years ago!"

He shouted until even the voice became raspy and hoarse, sounding much lower than a child should. When I thought about how this was a legacy that my father had left me, I almost felt like laughing at the disgusting situation.

In order to stop the raging child from resisting, the soldiers had pinned his arms to the ground. Although the skinny child seemed like a withered tree branch on the ground, but there was no fear at all. How resolute.

“What, you think it’s funny? You were only a baby back then, so you think whatever your damned dad did had nothing to do with you?”

His voice traveled low along the ground. It’s almost praiseworthy how clear the malice and murderous intent are. If it weren’t for the soldiers around, the glare indicated that there was a possibility of actually acting on it.

“Is that really so?”

“While you were drinking your milk and sleeping every day, how many people do you think died?”

It should have nothing to do with me. After all, when I was two, I was being comfortably raised up by that disgusting excuse for a lord. If even that’s a crime, to the point of being hated where people think it would have been better if I had died, that’s so childish that it’s hilarious. Well, it’s as expected of a child who hasn’t even reached ten yet.

In this world, the system of extending complicity for a crime to the criminal’s family members is used. For heinous criminals, the entire family would be executed, and even babies in different households, if they were nieces or nephews, would be included. Under that logic, it is indeed strange that I’m still alive.

– But, what of it. Since I’m currently alive as an exception to the norm, I have no intentions whatsoever of committing suicide because of drowning in guilt, or allowing myself to be killed by the people in my domain.

“72.”

“……Eh?”

“From the time since I was born, I know about 72 people in this domain that have died. 23 died while being sent off as ‘labor’ to other territories, 11 died of natural causes, and 6 have gone missing. What of it?”

If he really insists that the people that have died since I was born is my fault, I’ll just accept it for now.

I had first recalled my previous life’s memories a bit before I turned one. Horrible things such as murder, everything rotten known to man were the foolish ideals here,

I had spent a year watching the lives of the people being spent as if they were disposable consumables.

After that is when I had found the poisonous hemlock by the edge of the pond close to the garden. The soup for the domain lord's family had been placed in a corner of the kitchen for cooling after it was prepared, and there had only been two cooks left alive of the original seven in the kitchen, so sneaking in had been simple. The ingredients that father had collected for his own tasting, it was forbidden for the commoner cooks to even think of tasting them, and anyone caught would not be forgiven and killed.

After I had obtained the poison, because I had hesitated about using it for so long, close to 40 more people died. That might be said to be my crime, but who's going to know?

"That's, that's!"

"I'm alive. The fact that I'm alive means, I don't want to die. Let me ask you back. Why do you think I still haven't killed you yet?"

I released Kamil's arm that I had been supporting myself with, and pulled out his ceremonial dagger from his waist. Even though its thin blade was decorative, it was still sharp enough to slice through a person's skin.

In those cloudy dark eyes, I saw fear for the first time.

Chapter 13
Life's hard mode

"You probably haven't even thought about the possibility of getting killed, right?"

I grabbed the child's hair and pressed it into the ground much like I would with an insect. After pulling away the hair and exposing the throat, I pressed the point of the blade against it.

He gulped down a breath. Even so he kept glaring resolutely, how courageous for a child this age.

"According to the words of the shrine maiden Xia Fema, sinners must be made to atone for their crimes with the appropriate punishment, in order to cleanse the soul of impurities. Then, how about if I immediately give you the death penalty here?"

"……If you're going to kill me, stop acting so pompous and hurry up with it already. Something like that, would have been nothing at all to your mom!"

Although the sentiment is admirable that he's still so spirited while barking at me, it's foolish.

"- Put him in the basement dungeons. It would be bad to spill blood during the festival."

I returned the dagger to Kamil, and left the child's line of sight. He's somewhat clever and impertinent, but I know well now that he's just a simple child. Yes, and on the surface Kamil seemed obedient and respectfully lowered his head, and with his instructions the soldiers began tying the child up with rope.

"What's this! In the end, you couldn't even kill me!"

While twisting around and trying to escape from the soldiers, the child was still shouting. I ignored all of it, and called out to Kamil again.

"Haul fifteen people from the village that have some relation to this child to the mansion. It's fine even if they are children."

“Yes.”

“Wh…… What! The villagers have nothing to do with this!”

The child suddenly went berserk in a frenzy, and I laughed inside. Once again I ignored it, and I indicated to the soldiers that they should carry it out immediately. Before long, I could no longer hear his voice due to a cloth gag.

“……What do you intend to do with that child? Charlie.”

Kamil held out his arm without me having to say anything, but maybe it’s because he’s interested or something, he asked me that with an emotion I couldn’t quite identify in his voice.

“I don’t know the answer to that question yet, since I haven’t decided upon it myself. For the time being, I’ll talk about it with the earl first. We can’t have the original plans for the birthday celebration get even more off track.”

While being supported by Kamil, I headed for the earl who was only a little off in the distance from us.

The soldiers’ bodies seemed to be rather rigid, as I took his hand. After witnessing my exchange where I confronted the child, staring directly into the eyes, sharp gazes were aimed at me. They seemed to be somewhat frightened and on guard against me. Perhaps in their hearts they’ve gotten farther away from me again.

However, this would have been necessary someday. I can’t always be seen by them as a child that they can be overly familiar with. I’m not a child that they can get emotionally attached to, it’s necessary to make them recognize and admit me as their lord that’s supposed to be their leader.

……Since it seems rather difficult, I’m getting a little depressed. I’ve gotten carried away by the mood, I wonder if this is fortunate or unfortunate.

The sun indicated that it’s now sometime in the afternoon. We’ve finally returned to the mansion, and the soldiers’ eyes were shining at the feast that had been prepared for them. The first day of my birthday celebration is supposed to be for the people. The afternoon had been marching around the villages, providing the people with food

and drink, for the sake of the villagers. At night, to thank the soldiers for their efforts, there would be a banquet at the mansion.

Considering the incident that had happened earlier in the day, it was decided to end the festivities immediately after the customary gift exchanging. It would probably be good for the soldiers as well to end things quietly without a fuss. They weren't drinking wine and remaining sober like children, looking down on the ground with cold eyes, it was clearly as if water had been poured over the mood of the feast.

With help from Mrs. Galton, I changed out of the tight, formal knight attire and back into a comfortable tunic and dalmatic. The dalmatic wasn't decorated with high class accessories, but it had a complicated weave pattern. The people hate it when the nobility are too luxurious. In order to avoid unnecessary backlash, the earl had decided to not use jewelry to decorate my outfit, but spent more money on tailoring the cloth instead.

After I finished getting dressed I supported myself against the door, and raised my voice to Mrs. Galton who was tidying up my formal wear. Recently she had gotten worse about trying to make me into her idea of a traditional girl. In her home region of Greenfield, the ideal girl was considered to be a housewife that didn't go out and work, and she seems to be seriously trying to apply that type of education to me. Although I am a girl, but before that the education necessary for a domain lord should be much more important.

"I'm going out for a bit. Remain here."

"Eliza-sama, where…… are you going by yourself?"

I pulled away from the hand that Mrs. Galton held out in offer to me, walked briskly out and quickly closed the door behind me. As long as I got a little distance between me and Mrs. Galton, she'll never find me. She'd never imagine that I'd be going to the basement dungeons.

The basement dungeons here in the mansions, had been wastefully expanded immensely by my father. Its area was about equal to the entire first floor. Since the stones here in the dungeon have had their fill of blood in the past twenty years, the air down here felt dreadfully gruesome. The stone walls appeared slightly wet under the light of the candle flames, giving an appalling reminder that these walls have been

coated in blood many times over. It seems that the rough stone walls have been used in the past to “grate” people with.

The child was crouching in a small individual jail cell with clean stone walls. In this dungeon that’s always dark even when it’s daylight outside, it would whit away at anyone’s spirit. After all, human beings are instinctively afraid of the dark.

“Get up.”

At my sudden line, the child’s face raised in response. The expression on the child’s face was exhaustion rather than the hatred shown for me earlier.

“……What did you come here for?”

“I’ve come to see you.”

His voice had no more of the spirit from the daytime, it was slightly bitter instead.

“You’re going to be executed as soon as the festivities are over. As complicity for your crime, the village mayor who had hired you, as well as his daughter, and the woman named Marley whose house you’ve been living in, and her two children as well are going to be executed along with you.”

I forced down the bitter taste as I mentioned the punishment, and my voice came out colder than I expected.

“……What, why?”

“You ask why? What you just did was attempted assassination of Arxian nobility, since I’m the Viscountess and lord of the domain here. Adding in the crime of treason, you’re now considered a heinous criminal. Surely you didn’t think that this would end simply as a child throwing a rock at another child?”

The child who was hugging their knees in the back of the jail cell was now shaking and started moving. Slowly crawling towards me, the child’s glittering dark eyes seemed like that of a specter’s. He gripped the iron bars of the cell tightly, and focused on me with a terribly calm expression.

“Even though you know that you’re a criminal, you’re going to punish the people in your domain to preserve your honor?”

……At that question which came from such a small child's mouth, I was both surprised and found it laughable. What a precocious child. This child's head was burning with a sense of righteous justice, but a lack of knowledge had invited misfortune.

"Is dying that scary? Or is it painfully tough that you've gotten those around you involved? Or maybe both?"

I tried my best to repress my slight smile as I asked. The child was glaring at me with eyes that wanted to shoot me dead, but for some reason I find it rather fun.

"You caused all this with your own foolishness. Your punishment is in complete accordance with the law. Maybe I should take up my father's hobby and take pleasure in harming the domain's people."

"……What?"

"A country's laws, are there to protect its people. That would include the nobility as well. The nobility aren't regular people, they're the gears that move this country. ……If foolish people forget that and try to hurt others, this country could be destroyed. Such as my father."

Since he hasn't received any education, I don't know if the true meaning of my words will be understood. I wonder just how impactful the ideas I borrowed from my previous life would be as a test. I didn't say anything else, and immediately turned around and left him in the dungeon.

Chapter 14
Scales of karma

On the second day of my birthday celebration, a priest from the church would perform a ceremony to receive blessings. As soon as their plain horse-drawn carriage arrived in the morning, just like yesterday, today's plans went out the window.

"This is…… Faris-dono……"

As soon as he saw the priest get off the horse-drawn carriage, Earl Terejia raised his voice questioningly. Faris? The priest that was coming today should have been named Almenes. Even more surprising, was how shocked Earl Terejia had sounded at seeing Faris and the earl respectfully lowering his head. They must be quite a high-ranking priest.

Just before the priest bowed, our eyes met for an instant. The priest's pupils were absolute pure black, it raised goosebumps on my flesh.

The priest was dressed in white priest robes and a veil, with a black shawl on the shoulders, and was holding a sword and staff taller than their body in their hands, both age and gender were difficult to determine.

The head of the staff was decorated with a triangular symbol that represented balance scales, and the circlet that was holding their veil had an ornament that resembled having a third eye on the forehead. The balance scales were meant to judge a person's good deeds against their bad deeds, the eye was a symbol of how the Xia church could see through one's sins, and the sword represented punishment and order, and the god Misorua would give blessings.

"Siegmund. It's been a while."

The voice seems a little too low for a woman, but slightly too high for a man. The gender is getting even harder to determine. When Kamil took the person's shawl for them, although he made a mockery of what a page was supposed to do, even though I could see the priest's shoulder line, as expected I still couldn't determine their gender.

"What happened to Almenes-dono?"

“Around this time of year, he’s been busy everywhere helping pray for the success of the spring festivities. Because of his accumulated fatigue, I’m replacing him today.”

Their skin and face still seemed young like a teenager’s, but their tone and attitude seemed like that of an old person. But why is it that there seems to be no sense of incongruity.

The two of them walked towards the mansion in silence. The priest named Faris had closed their eyes right after getting off the horse-drawn carriage and greeting the earl, without paying attention to me. Since even the earl is allowing this, I wonder just how high-ranking this priest is.

There were distinctions between priests, monks, and other clergymen. Priests are given their positions by the king, and would carry out various rituals for both the royal palace and temples, they belong to both the royal palace and the church. Since the earl is ignoring the fact that this priest didn’t even deign to greet me, a Viscountess, the priest must be at least at the level of a temple head or chief priest…… Comparing it with noble ranks, at least a senior earl in rank. I wonder why such an important person would take the place of their subordinate and come all the way out here.

“When will the ceremony be?”

“It’s planned for noon.”

Faris walked with long strides, at a fast pace. It’s impressive how fast the priest’s walking considering the difficulty of doing so with the length of the robe’s hems, and that they’re not walking so fast to the extent of being rude. Since I’m a child, sometimes people forget about that and I can’t keep up.

“Until then, is it alright if I take a look at the garden?”

“……Of course.”

Earl Terejia glanced at me. He probably wants me to return to the mansion first. If the priest wants to see the garden, it might mean that they have something to talk about. Otherwise, since the earl probably has more preparations to finish, it might be better though if somebody else had guided the priest.

Because of his status, Kamil hadn’t said a single word this entire time, and we saw off the two of them to the garden.

In the Mansion of Golden Hills, there is no prayer room. Normally, it should be found in every domain lord's residence, but…… Several generations ago the Kaldia family head seems to have destroyed it, but because records of that time were few, no details remained. Because such a thing happened, I'm also interested in knowing why we haven't been excommunicated from the church yet.

Since there wasn't enough money to construct a new church here, the ceremony this time would be performed in a small church that's in the area under direct control.

The servants in the mansion had worked on cleaning here, so the church was nice and tidy. Inside, it resembled the chapels in my previous world…… I think. It felt a bit western and religious somehow, is all I knew.

Although I feel like it resembles a chapel, I actually don't remember most of the features in detail. After having spent six years already in a completely different world and culture, my previous life's memories were becoming vague.

In the innermost part of the church was an altar. The altar was also decorated with a large sword and scales, and the symbol of the Ar Xia church, the third eye, was drawn on the tiles of the walls.

To me who had almost nothing to do with anything religious in both my previous life and this one, I couldn't help but feel like this was all very strange. Or maybe it's simply because the distorted light coming down from the stained glass skylight was too dazzling for me.

White cloth had been used generously for my own vestments. Since it had been made especially for this ceremony, there were no decorations and it wasn't ornate, and the length of my skirt and veil were just long enough to drag on the ground. I did my best to put up with the weight while progressing to the altar. There, the priest Faris was waiting for me with a staff and sword in each of their hands.

This ceremony was attended by very few people as most didn't know the details, it was just the presiding priest, the person that would receive the blessing, the person's guardian if they were a minor, and a non family member as a "witness," were all that were considered necessary for the good of the ceremony.

Because it was considered necessary for a person to eliminate their sins in order to receive the blessings of the gods, the ceremony also included a ritual where the sins

of the person being blessed would be judged. That's why this ceremony was highly confidential compared to the others.

The state church of Arxia is the Ar Xia church. The sects belonging to this religion, are collectively considered part of the Xia religion. A millennium ago, St. Ahar had created the Ar Xia Holy Kingdom, creating the Xia religion's largest faction, the Ar Xia church, and since St. Ahar had been a direct descendant of the Xia church's founder, the shrine maiden Xia Fema, it seems that they often called themselves the orthodox church.

Common between all of the Xia sects, were the concepts of sin, punishment, and law. In all the Xia sects, the holy words that the founder Xia Fema had left behind, the "Sacred Code," was treated as the holy scriptures of the church. This book had contained an advanced law system that's being used even today, and keeping order in society and living life with reason and ration is what Xia emphasizes.

The priest tapped me on my feet, shoulders, and forehead.

"And now I shall begin the ceremony of blessing. Daughter of Kaldia, Eliza, raise your face and know your sins."

I raised my head according to Faris's directions. The dishes of the scales on the altar, the left one indicated sins, and the right side represented virtues, it was customary for the nobility with their own territories to put the "Sacred Code" on the left side, and grains on the right side.

……That's why, when I saw what was actually there, my breath stopped for a moment.

On top of a piece of parchment in the left dish, was a sprig of poisonous hemlock. On top of the bundle of golden wheat in the right dish, was another sprig of poisonous hemlock for some reason. As if hiding in its shadow, a withered, tiny flower was there as well.

My heart was beating so hard it was painful. I suddenly choked, because I had forgotten to breathe. I felt a shock as if I had been hit in the head.

"The scales are tilted to the right. This makes up for your sins. Confronting your own sins shall be your punishment."

My brain felt completely numb, and Faris's voice swirled dully around me. Earl Terejia softly tapped me on my back as I just kept staring at the scales in a daze, and finally I was able to breathe again after having my breath caught in my throat.

A sprig of poisonous hemlock had been placed on both dishes. Its bright green color attracted my gaze.

Since when was it known? Why was it known? Was it Earl Terejia who knew? Or was it the priest Faris that knew somehow?

At the fact that somebody definitely knew about my major crime, my body trembled. As if my heart was filled with ice water, I felt my hands and feet turning ice cold first instead of my head which was still numb.

"Never shall you forget your own sins. – Now then, you shall receive Misorua's blessings."

Chapter 15
Acting like a child

When the ceremony finished and I was allowed to leave, I immediately collapsed onto Kamil's arm. What's this, said the earl in an incomplete sentence as he met my eyes. As I saw my reflection in his quiet eyes, I forced a sound out of my throat.

"Since I'm still young, this ceremony really tired me out. I'm going to get some good rest."

From behind me, Faris's laughter seemed to catch up to my back and chase me. I felt an uncanny sense of fear, and even though I knew it was unseemly, I clung tightly to Kamil.

The left dish of the scales represented my "sins." That piece of parchment had listed the names of the 72 people in my domain that had died after I was born. And, the leaves of that poisonous hemlock. The people that I had let down, and my own parents and siblings. If that's my sin, I fully understand.

Since I had told them I wasn't feeling well, Kamil bid them goodbye for me, and set a quick course back to the mansion in order to get me some rest as soon as possible. I didn't the ability right now to think of anything, and I clenched onto him so tightly that my hands hurt. My fingertips were turning pale from a lack of blood circulation, and my nails that I had injured yesterday from clawing the dirt were beginning to hurt.

"Charlie, calm down."

As if he could see something was wrong with me, Kamil tapped me gently on the back. That prodded me to loosen my grip on him. I should stop hurting my own body in vain just because I was in a state of confusion, but I was still filled with unpleasant feelings.

"……I don't know what Charlie's sins are, but your sins have been forgiven, and I've ascertained that you've properly received the blessings. Come on, take a deep breath."

Alright, it's fine, as Kamil shook my hand gently, giving some relief to the bitter taste in my mouth that had been spreading. Simply seeing me as a mere child and protecting

me, his sweetness at this time made me think maybe he wasn't such a terrible fellow after all.

Even though my sins are rather unforgivable, that priest had said that my sins were compensated for. The church is in charge of the justice system in this country, meaning my crime would not be called into question after what happened just now. However, there had been nothing related to repenting for my sins on the scales earlier. The atonement for my sins might not be over yet. Since I was clenching my teeth too hard and the grinding was beginning to hurt, it jolted me out of this train of thought. Kamil kept tapping my back to help me take large, deep breaths, and I changed my line of thinking.

So the crime that I'm responsible for committing is now known, but it's unbecoming that you've become so unsettled over this, Eliza Kaldia.

By scolding myself, I calmed myself down, and went over everything in my mind that had frightened me.

The ice coldness I had felt during the ceremony wasn't that strange, it was my brain sending orders to cool down my body as my blood was beginning to boil.

It doesn't matter who that priest is.

The problem is whether or not that priest intends to do something against me.

Nor does it matter if everything about me had been exposed.

No matter how much they know, it should be fine if I just act like a child and pretend to know nothing.

"Kamil, let me down."

My voice sounded ice cold when I spoke. Kamil who was just about to enter the vicinity of the mansion stopped his movements.

"……Charlie?"

"Let me down. I'll walk by myself."

I looked at the shocked-seeming Kamil directly, and as if he was flinching from me, he slowly let me down from his arms.

“Thank you for your trouble in helping me. Sorry for showing you such an ungraceful appearance.”

I looked at Kamil whose eyes were wide open and mouth was silent. Amongst the greenery, his red eyes seemed jarringly unnatural, and were glimmering with a color almost like blood.

I suddenly woke up, and rose up in bed. The water clock indicated that the time was about midnight. I have no recollections of having changed into my nightclothes. In the end, the priest Faris’s horse-drawn carriage had brought me back to the mansion, and I had been so fatigued that I probably fell asleep then and there.

The side table by my bed had a silver pitcher of water and a plate of fruit placed on it. I only drank the water, and got down from my bedsheets. Even though my floor is carpeted, the cold still started transmitting from my bare feet. Night in springtime is quite cold.

I put on an appropriate jacket and left my room. I headed straight for the basement dungeon. Why I was going there, I didn’t even know myself.

The chilly stone prison was just like a coffin. While my father had been alive, this had truly been a place for the dead.

I had a sudden urge to destroy this dungeon, but I somehow managed to calm myself down. Even though there’s probably no need for such an overly large dungeon, and it might be better to get rid of it, right now I need to cooly evaluate my actions and not give in to impulses.

The child was in the back of the same jail cell as yesterday, and was sleeping in a thick and old blanket. How relaxed even though he might die tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. After thinking so, I was finally able to smile a bit.

“Whenever I come speak with you, I’ve gotten into the habit of becoming overly prideful.”

I could take a high-handed attitude against the child that's been imprisoned by me, but I could only escape with my tail between my legs when my secret was discovered by the adults, my own shallowness and foolishness made me angry. My smile that had appeared changed to self-deriding laughter.

I gripped the cold iron bars so tightly that it hurt, and listened to the child's sounds of sleeping for a bit.

– The poisonous hemlock had been placed on both the left and right sides of the scales. On the same level as the sin of killing my entire family, having removed my wicked family was also recognized as a virtue. Even though my oldest sister had only been twelve years old, it's pathetic that people wanted her dead already. And now, when I'm only half as old as she was, people are wishing me dead in the same way, I feel like that's pathetic as well – my self-derision now changed into self-disdain after thinking about it.

And then, I thought about the withered flower that had almost been hidden. The priest had picked a flower that was used for graves, what a terrible person.

How rude to have toyed with my emotions like that. Having such an important evidence placed in front of me, I'd gotten distraught. What were the goals of the priest who toyed with my mind, and the earl who had allowed it? In the cold, dark dungeon, my head remained cool.

Nobody other than myself knows about what I've done, so that means they have some way of revealing past sins, does this means I have no way of escaping from the atonement? – Well, if that's what they want.

I thought over the events in the church again in detail. Thinking about it now, it really wasn't something to have gotten so shaken up over. I felt angry, embarrassed, and disappointed about how distraught I'd been.

The earl was probably disappointed in me as well. The fact that the list of 72 people that had died was there, was definite proof that he had provided that piece of evidence. At thinking so, my shoulders involuntarily dropped in frustration.

"I've found you!"

A voice suddenly spoke up from behind me, shocking me and causing me to tense up. By reflex, I reached for the sword in my waist. Oh, this voice was Kamil's.

When I squinted towards the dark entrance to the dungeons, in the dull light provided by the candles was the person I had expected.

“I mean, Charlie. Such a childish thing like running about outside your room at this time of night, if you were going to do it, couldn’t you have started at an earlier age? It’s suspicious because you’re long past that age now.”

Contrary to his words, his tone of voice was rather gentle.

“……You seem to be confused, since I am a child?”

“A regular kid you know, should have ran around, laughed, and cried more. You never say anything, you’re very observant, always obedient, and the fact that you can suppress your own feelings is incredible.”

Kamil didn’t hide his own incredulous attitude as he kept approaching me. Am I going to be brought back? I instinctively gripped the iron bars of the jail cell even tighter. I still wanted to think about various things here for a little longer.

But contrary to what I expected, Kamil stopped once he reached in front of me and simply put something on my shoulder. It was a slightly heavy woolen cloak that worked well during the winter. My clothes alone hadn’t been enough to keep out the cold, but with this the cold air could no longer permeate through the clothing and reach my skin.

“If I’m bothering you, I’ll wait outside.”

Kamil suddenly chuckled. Why is it that, my throat suddenly hurt so badly.

“……No, you don’t have to leave, won’t you stay here with me for a little while?”

I had to squeeze those words out of my throat, but when they came out they sounded so soft and faint.

Chapter 16
What I learned after my social debut

It's the third and final day of my birthday celebration. In the halls that were normally empty, and the garden were quite a few people I didn't know. They were nobles from neighboring domains, and various nobles connected to Earl Terejia in some way. Although I know their names, it's my first time meeting them.

I killed my family at an early age, and I hadn't even gone out from the area under direct control until the day before yesterday, so I had no way of getting acquainted with other nobles. Having so many people gather here in the mansion, it's the first time that I can recall.

From my second floor window, I could see a deluge of various colors. Since I'm still a minor, the earl is taking care of greeting all the guests. The invited guests were waiting in the garden.

"That young man over there is Viscount Henznaut's only son. And, the person next to him in green formal knight attire is one of Earl Genas's sons."

"They're about at the age of graduating from school. If it continues to remain peaceful, it'll be beneficial for us to have good relations with them in the future."

Kamil stood next to me and helped me by providing information on the neighboring domains' nobles, since he had served as the earl's guard before during visits to other domains, he recognized them.

The nobles from the royal capital were mostly lower-ranked nobles and nobles without their own lands, and having their children accompany them might be normal, but the smaller border domains' nobles often had commoners accompanying them instead. As a respectable noble from the royal capital, Earl Terejia who had a history of serving in the royal palace, whenever he visited neighboring domains, just like how he would have lower-ranking nobles serving him in the royal capital, he would bring servants along with him.

And, because there weren't all that many chances to visit the neighboring domains, it's really convenient how Kamil had gotten to go along with the earl every time.

Since it was plainly obvious, no matter how dumb Kamil was, since he was my retainer, the earl must have been trying to train Kamil and give him some experience. Today he's left Kamil by my side as well, which was probably something done on purpose.

And so, while looking at the nobles from the window, the earl's servant Bellway suddenly came up the stairs. This man is capable of appearing unexpectedly at random. I wonder if it's a requirement to be able to walk extremely fast as the earl's secretary.

"Eliza-sama, it seems that everyone has arrived."

"Got it. I'll be there soon. Kamil, get Rashiok."

"Yes, Eliza-sama."

In front of Bellway, Kamil didn't have his usual attitude, and I left him in charge of leading Rashiok. An extravagant mantle cascaded down from his shoulders.

Today, just like always, I was wearing formal knight attire, and today's was less casual and more formal than usual. The only slightly informal part was my longcoat. However, my mantle was heavier than usual, and annoyingly, I would become winded if I moved my upper body too much, but there was no helping it. It would have been better if I could ride a horse like on the first day of my birthday celebration, when I had to walk, I suddenly felt my vexation increasing. I reflexively raised my right elbow to try and alleviate some of the weight, but Bellway softly chided me, saying "bear with it, it's only for today."

"Formal ceremonial wear is really so heavy."

"It's actually lighter than a dress. It's because the undergarments are heavier."

"……"

Bellway talked about women's undergarments like it was nothing, to which I couldn't reply and remained silent, as we headed downstairs to the first floor. At that moment, my attention was involuntarily caught by the face that appeared around the corner.

"Ahh, Eliza-sama!"

“Mrs. Galton……”

My voice sounded fed up, and although I wanted to come up with an excuse, there was no helping it. There was an abundant amount of soft, sheer fabric in her arms, and she was also holding onto a gaudy dress. Because today is the first day where I’ll be introduced to all the nobles, she had implored for me to at least wear a dress on the occasion, and had appealed over and over to anyone and everyone without regards for who they were.

“Eliza-sama, ojou-sama. Please, please reconsider, if you appear in front of all those nobles dressed like that, isn’t that just like you’re declaring that you’ll be working even though you’re a girl!?”

“And is something wrong with that, Mrs. Galton?”

I’m really fed up with her gender discrimination. Naturally, my tone became rather harsh, and Mrs. Galton shrank back slightly from my pressure. I bet that Bellway behind me probably has a scary face as well.

“Without a doubt, I’m the lord of this domain. I have no relatives, and I can’t afford to leave everything about managing this territory to Earl Terejia for the entire remaining time until I graduate from school. He’s already quite elderly, I don’t know when I might lose his protection.”

I don’t have the free time to continuously listen to Mrs. Galton’s meaningless petitions. Especially right now, when important noble guests are currently waiting for my arrival. It’s very regrettable that my nanny who raised me was unable to discern the proper time and place for things.

“If that happens, I’d have to govern this domain and its people entrusted to me by the king all by myself. That’s why I’m learning. That’s why I’ll be appearing in front of the nobles as I am. Or, is there a problem with that?”

“That’s……”

Seeing that Mrs. Galton was lost for words, since I was in a hurry, I talked over her as I passed her by. She’s become more heated recently. Since I’ve grown and her duties as my nanny have been significantly reduced, I wonder if she’s feeling frustration.

Whatever the case may be, if she doesn't calm down a bit, she'll become more and more isolated within the mansion. It might seem odd if I try to seriously confront her about her views, but luckily Bellway feels the same way I do and keeps her in check.

I could hear the band beginning to play their music. I stopped for a moment at the hallway door, to go over my appearance once more. Bellway reached out his hand, and slightly adjusted the position of my scarf.

"Your sharp words just earlier, were quite refreshing to hear. If Eliza-sama really thinks that, the earl-sama will be pleased to hear that as well."

"……Because I returned with an injury on the first day of my birthday celebration, I think it's made me more irritable. Mrs. Galton's actions, in her own way, are out of consideration for me and my future as well."

"Yes, that's true."

Bellway didn't smile as he replied, and he entered the hall without saying another word, so I followed him without hesitation. When the doors opened, brightness filled the entire hall as lights were everywhere despite it being noon. I glanced everywhere around me, but could not feel any fragments of favor from their eyes. Well, it's nothing to falter over. After all, it's common to first meetings. I got used to it even though it's unpleasant. As expected of the guests gathered by the earl, there was no rude commotion to be heard from them at all.

Since it's like this, while I can't completely put aside the issue with Mrs. Galton, I decided to give up defending her. It'll be terrible for me later if I'm inattentive and make a blunder.

Earl Terejia brought me around, and introduced me to the noble guests. Among the Arxian nobility, there are customs and manners that must be observed when introducing someone to one's acquaintances for the first time. It's that I'm not supposed to do anything as the guest of honor, and someone else shall introduce you to everyone. Meaning, I was limited from directly greeting people. I was introduced to nobles from domains we had dealings with, domains that we could build relationships with in the future, our neighboring domains, and nobles from the royal capital that the earl has known for a long time.

Since Kamil had been teaching me prior to this, remembering their names was a relatively smooth process. Guests from important domains that we would trade with

such as Henznaut and Rogshia would have to be treated courteously, while I had to pay attention to not offend those from nearby strong domains such as Genas or Jugfena, it was quite tiresome.

Among them, there was a young man who strangely didn't seem disagreeable to me. He seemed young, probably just a little past twenty years old. He had snow white skin that I'd hardly ever seen since being born in this world, rare silver hair, and deep blue eyes. He must be from northwest of the royal capital, only the people from west of the Albus Mountains have such a special coloring, and my eyes were involuntarily drawn to him. He met my eyes, and broke into a faint smile. At his complete seeming lack of bad intentions, I actually started to think he was suspicious and only nodded back.

"Kamil, who's that person with the silver hair?"

When Kamil took a look at the young man I was indicating at, he seemed to be a little lost for a bit, until he finally replied in a voice lacking confidence in the answer.

"……I think that's Margrave Molton from the Foshubari region."

Foshubari…… the most northwestern region of the kingdom. Since it's rather far away, I only know the rough outline of the geography in that region. He's really come quite a long ways just to visit this backwater domain belonging to a junior viscountess. It takes almost a month to come here using a horse-drawn carriage. As a margrave, I wouldn't think that he has all that much influence in the palace, so I don't know why the earl would have invited this man here.

"Would you like to go greet him?"

"……Nah, it's fine."

Earl Terejia hadn't introduced him. Rather than spending time on him, I think I should be paying more attention to other nobles.

And so I drove that beautiful silver color out of my mind, and went back to watching Earl Terejia. The young man continued watching me for a bit. I could see him out of the corner of my eye, he was the only one in this venue who had something like a slight, soft smile at me for some reason.

Chapter 17
Elise Cherstoka

Because an orphan from Cyril village in the Kaldia domain had thrown a rock at Viscountess Kaldia, and caused her to fall off her horse, several villagers were punished and had to take responsibility.

The child that was the actual culprit in question was tied up in a jute sack and thrown into a river, while those that hired the child to do it, the people that the child was living with, and various other villagers associated were flogged in front of the other villagers. That was the rumor that reached the capital soon after my birthday celebration ended.

The Kaldia domain has no particularly noticeable features about it. However, the scandal about the previous lord Orville Kaldia's atrocities, and the family's deaths by poisoning in which only the youngest daughter survived, causing Marquis Rittergau's younger brother to have to become her guardian, were some of the biggest events to be gossiped about by the nobles in the past thirty years, the gossipy nobles in the royal capital with too much leisure time all had their attention on the Kaldia domain.

"- and that seems to be the current overview of the Kaldia domain in the royal capital."

"Thanks for your hard work, Kamil. Although it's within expectations, that they even know about the orphan incident means that the House of Lords really has nothing better to do than pay attention to what's going on here. It's depressing to think about that."

The other day, when the earl attended a meeting at the House of Lords, as part of the earl's retinue, Kamil had went along with him to the royal capital for the first time. Even though I'm a noble, I still can't go to the House of Lords as I'm only six. But this means that the earl finally intends to take me to the royal capital soon.

The House of Lords, is like a government agency, which all Arxian nobility with peerage belong to. It's the highest level government body below the king, and it can do various legislative and administrative tasks apart from judicial ones which are left to the church.

As an aside, thanks to the existence of the House of Lords, there were very few other places for Arxian nobles to socialize. Very little diplomacy or politics was actually conducted there, it's simply become a place for nobles to have fun and show off their power, far from the church's values of being contented with honest poverty.

"So that means Charlie's surprisingly delicate?"

"What's this about surprisingly, how rude."

Kamil was just as imprudent as usual, and I began to massage the wrinkle between my eyebrows reflexively. I had said before that I would forgive his irreverence, and since I had memories of a previous life, I figured it would probably be easier to put up with Kamil's informal attitude rather than the alternative, I was finally able to organize my feelings recently.

I briefly summarized what I had heard from Kamil and jotted it down on a piece of parchment, sorted it away simply on my writing desk, and got up from my chair. The sunlight shining through the thick window panes felt so warm, it was making me drowsy. Recently the chill of spring had been fading, the long hours of sunshine in the summer were arriving.

I laid my head on Rashiok's belly while he was sleeping on the windowsill, feeling his smooth scales against my cheek as he breathed. Rashiok woke up with a snort of annoyance as his nap had been disturbed, but even so he stretched out a wing and covered my body. Before I'd realized it, his wings had become wide enough to comfortably cover my small body. Even though his wings had only been the length of Kamil's arm when he came to this mansion, his growth rate is really quite something.

"Charlie, are you sleepy?"

"No, I'm just lying down for a bit. Let's go see how Elise is doing before noon."

– The residents of the Mansion of Golden Hills changed immediately following my birthday celebration. My nanny was changed, two girls were welcomed as my companions, and Kamil got his own small room as well. However, one of the girls "was sickly and had to recuperate right after she arrived." – That's the story.

"How's the food, Elise?"

"……"

In one of the innermost rooms of the mansion, I greeted the child that was lying in bed. Although I called him a child, he was actually three years older than me, and due to malnourishment he didn't seem older than me at all. Although he was now receiving good care every day, there was still something wild about his black hair, and his shining dark eyes were glaring at me. The gloves that covered his fingertips and the dress he was wearing don't seem to fit his image too well.

"The cook Nathan was worried about you and even went to the trouble of making it for you himself. If you don't properly eat your food, you won't have the energy to strangle me, 'Elise.'"

A jarring metallic sound resounded. From behind me, Kamil softly put a hand on my shoulder, hesitantly thinking to restrain me from something rash. On the bed of the dim room, the small child was trembling in anger.

"……So annoying. Besides, my name's not Elise. I'm Ratoka."

"No, that's wrong. The orphan named Ratoka from Cyril village has already been executed. You're Elise Cherstoka, my playmate companion, and a girl belonging to the Mansion of Golden Hills."

"That's not it! ……I'll definitely kill you someday!!"

This time his chains were making a loud jingling sound. I laughed at his high-spirited appearance as he shouted at me. You've gone overboard, Kamil indicated to me by squeezing my shoulder more firmly.

"You, in the end, you're just a coward who couldn't even kill me!"

"Well, I have no idea what you're talking about at all. You're such a precious companion of mine that's come to visit my mansion, why would I have you killed?"

In anger, he threw a pillow at me. However, since it was filled with light feathers it had little momentum, and it fell silently to the floor before it even reached me.

"Let's ask Nathan to prepare something that's easier to consume. Since she can't even get down from the bed, let's not make things too hard on her, right, 'Elise?'"

“Shut up!”

As I listened to him yell, I wondered if he was going to burst a blood vessel, as I left the dim room. I used a cheap provocation, but as long as he eats, then it’s fine.

But next, just how long does Kamil intend to keep his hand on my shoulder? However, his hand did not leave on its own. When I looked at him to see what was going on, he hesitantly opened his mouth.

“……Um, you know, Charlie. Why’d you decide to specially place that child close to you? You really might be killed in your sleep.”

“It’s not that I’m specially keeping him close. I’m keeping him alive because his dark red eyes could be useful. You can fool people with hair color, but eye color is the one thing that can’t be changed. Even if he won’t become a trustworthy retainer, there’s plenty of ways to use tools.”

When I said that, I saw something that I’d never seen before in Kamil’s eyes. He furrowed his eyebrows while thinking something, but for some reason it didn’t seem like he was condemning me. What is this feeling, I wonder. Even though I probably should have known it in my previous life, right now the current me had no idea.

A strong gust of wind must have blown outside the window, the leaves of the trees suddenly made a loud rustling sound.

“……If that’s the excuse you’re going to make to me, that means you don’t think you need to tell me.”

“Then, I didn’t kill him, in order to use him. Because I wanted him to acknowledge me, I placed him beside me. Are you satisfied now, Kamil.”

Silence enveloped the hallway. Kamil’s hand dropped from my shoulder, and I saw him clenching his fists tightly. It seemed as if he disliked me looking at him, and he averted his gaze. I wonder if he’s disappointed in me at this late hour.

He can think whatever he likes, and we continued under this strange atmosphere. This wasn’t the only “Elise’s” room we were going to. As we walked on in unnatural seeming silence, something heavy suddenly landed on top of my head. It was loosely twirling around my hair, and I realized that it was Kamil’s hand.

From his hand that seemed like it was comforting me, I finally remembered the emotion I saw in Kamil's eyes earlier. It had been pity. Kamil had felt compassion for me. However, as for why he would pity me, I still have no idea.

Chapter 18
Two pieces of news

As I was about to open the door, I could hear coughing from the other side. Cough, cough, it was dry coughing caused by asthma, it was a subdued female voice. I didn't enter this room rudely without announcing myself like I did with the earlier innermost room of the mansion, but knocked twice on the door first, and heard her say "please come in."

"Excuse me for coming in. How are you feeling today, 'Elise'-dono?"

The other "Elise's" room was much different, with a bright and airy interior, but the sound of coughing continued. On the bed was a girl who was sitting up. There was a rather tall maid who was running her hand up and down the girl's back, and she was looking this way.

"Eliza-sama."

"Good afternoon, Maya. How is Elise-dono feeling today?"

"After coming to this mansion, she's gotten a little better."

In the meantime, the girl's coughing reduced a little, and her breathing got slower as her asthma attacks stopped. Although a bit messy, the girl's brown hair remained lustrous as her maid Maya brushed it for her, and the girl finally raised her head after the maid was done. It was completely unlike the bitter expression at seeing me that the other Elise had, she had a gentle smile.

"My apologies, Eliza-sama."

"No, it's fine."

Her name is Elise Sherstok, and she's the Stadel domain lord's niece from bordering north of the Kaldia domain. Although Viscount Stadel and I only greeted each other at my birthday celebration, he took a liking to the warmer climate in the Kaldia domain, and asked later if his sickly niece could come stay here to help her body recover. Elise's father, Baron Sherstok had land usage rights into my territory along part of the

Kaldia domain, and he agreed to sell those back to us in exchange for taking in his daughter.

By the way, in Arxia, only nobles have land ownership rights. Even so, only nobles with peerage have their own lands, for example a viscount with his own domain, would have the authority to govern and tax the people that live there. A baron would only be allowed to use the land, so other than areas under direct control, he would have to rent out land to use.

The Stadel domain is a small territory at the feet of the Amon Nor Mountains, it's only known as a good place to avoid the heat during the summer, other than that it was just like the Kaldia domain in that it had no special products or noticeable features about it, the main difference being that there was a large difference in temperature.

Viscount Stadel and Baron Sherstok had been looking for a warm location for Elise to recover in for many years, and since Earl Terejia is now in charge of governing the Kaldia domain, after consulting with him, we were the first to come to an agreement with them.

Even diplomatically, because of my father, we had been isolated in all directions. There was no reason to refuse, and so we agreed to take in the other "Elise" and had her brought over here by ship.

"If you ever have trouble with anything, please don't hesitate to let me know immediately."

"Since everyone here treats me so well, I'm having so much fun every day, so I think there'll be no need."

"That's great to hear."

Her voice was thin due to the asthma, but Elise was very mild-mannered and ladylike as she made conversation with a smile. We talked about the flowers that Maya and the gardener Boriswaf had picked for Elise this morning, and made other such idle chatter until I left the room, by the time I finally left, Kamil who had waited outside all this time seemed to have a strained expression. I beckoned him silently with my hand, and we headed for the domain lord's office.

After making sure we were far enough away from Elise's room, without having to ask him, he began his report to me as we continued walking without changing his pace.

“It seems that quite a number of refugees have reached Fort Jugfena.”

“The farmers with the Shiru tribe?”

“There’s an emergency summons from the House of Lords for a meeting. Not just the earl, Charlie as well.”

……Me as well? Since Earl Terejia has all the rights to govern as a domain lord currently, to even be summoning me, I wonder if it’s finally time to gather troops at Fort Jugfena. An uneasy feeling started swelling over me, and I quickened my pace reflexively.

In the domain lord’s office, Earl Terejia was busy putting away some documents, and his secretary Bellway was doing the same task with a serious expression on his face. There were several scrolls of blank parchment paper out, perhaps for emergency communications as several red homing pigeons were perched on the window.

Red homing pigeons have innate homing abilities and are known for their vivid red color, as well as being the best species of messenger pigeon. Normally white pigeons are used for everyday communications, but red ones are used during emergencies to be able to tell the importance of the message at a glance. By the way, these birds, although they’re called pigeons, they’re actually about double the size of the pigeons from my previous world, since the window frame didn’t have enough room on it, several birds were perched on the floor as well.

“You’re here.”

“Yes. I’ve heard that due to the mass influx of refugees, the House of Lords has summoned us.”

“It seems that the Shiru tribe themselves aren’t that close to our borders just yet. That’s a relief for the time being. The House of Lords meeting is in four days. It means that there’s no need for haste just yet.”

Even as he said that, Earl Terejia hurriedly tied a piece of parchment to a pigeon’s legs, and sent it off. By reflex, Kamil and I both looked at each other in response to the contradiction between his words and actions.

“Then, what’s with this situation?”

“At this bad timing, Viscount Galbaito has passed away. He was unmarried and left no children behind.”

Ehh, a sound of surprise escaped from my throat. Viscount Galbaito’s domain borders Kaldia to the south, his territory had been between mine and Margrave Genas’s domain, he had been someone quite young who’d just graduated school recently. Although I had heard that he was sickly, he had just come to my birthday celebration recently and greeted me.

Without minding that I was lost for words at this sudden turn of events, Earl Terejia continued the conversation.

“The only person with inheritance rights to the Galbaito domain is Margrave Genas. Both his son and his nephew are currently in high-ranking positions at the royal palace. Now then, Eliza, what do you think will happen to the Galbaito and Kaldia domains?”

I blinked at the sudden question. I get that Margrave Genas is going to inherit the Galbaito domain. That’s because the Galbaito family was originally a branch family of the Genas family, and Margrave Genas had been Viscount Galbaito’s father.

Eleanor Galbaito had been Margrave Genas’s second wife, and so their child had been adopted into the Galbaito family and taken their name, but Eleanor and both her parents, the previous Viscount were already deceased.

“It means that the Galbaito domain will be incorporated into the Genas domain. If that happens, then Kaldia will now border both the Jugfena royal domain and the Genas domain.”

“That’s correct.”

Earl Terejia nodded, and his eyes indicated that I should continue.

“……We’ll become the critical link in the supply chain against Rindarl.”

“That’s not all. This emergency meeting will probably decide if the refugees flowing in will be officially accepted by our country. If that happens, it’s almost certain that Kaldia will become the place to accept them.”

“If we take in the refugees, if that also leads to us extending protection to the Shiru tribe, it’ll mean our domain will become directly involved in war, is that correct?”

Earl Terejia silently confirmed my assumption.

“……Is there something that even I can do?”

“Of course. If we’re to be taking in refugees, preparations will be necessary. Because after the refugees, the Shiru tribe and Densel soldiers will be coming next. It’ll be impossible for Kaldia to remain uninvolved.”

I nodded at the earl’s words, while Bellway brought a large pile of documents out onto the desk. There were so many documents that it was scary to look at, but Bellway managed all of them just like usual with a smile.

“Alright, Eliza-sama, please go over these documents here. They’re contracts on cooperation with the neighboring domains. From these, please find and jot down everything related to defense cooperation with each domain on the parchment sheets here, it’ll be a great help.”

“I understand.”

Right as I sat in my chair, I saw Kamil working on yet another large pile of documents. To have both me and Kamil working on this, as expected it must be quite the imminent situation. Thinking that conflict with the neighboring country would likely become reality soon, my throat became dry.

End of Act 1, Part 1

【 PART II 】

Chapter 19
The House of Lords is like the sea

Several chandeliers crafted of exquisite gold dangled from the ceiling of the great hall, even though it was crowded right now, looking at their luxuriousness, if there were fewer people here, this place would make a fine place for dancing.

The House of Lords is located in one of the royal palace's castles, the Arktoria Castle, and my mouth was wide agape at seeing how high the ceilings were. There were also stained glass windows with religious drawings and silver frames, giving various colors to the sunlight hitting the hall. This castle was only meant for national politics, and so because nobles are the ones who use this place the most, even the conference hall had such sparkling beauty and extravagance.

"Is it that unusual?"

"Well, a little."

Earl Terejia's voice from next to me brought me back to my senses. We're not here to take in the sights, and I hurriedly refocused myself.

"Marquis Rittergau has arrived. It will begin soon."

The earl pointed at the innermost desk. When I looked over there, besides Marquis Rittergau who was just about to sit down, there was also the commander-in-chief of the kingdom's armies, Marquis Rolentsor, the highest ranking noble, Archduke Dovadain, and various other high-ranking economic ministers and priests, all the prominent leading figures from the royal palace were there. Also among them were Margrave Genas, and the one in charge of Fort Jugfena, Earl Einsbark.

I'm not sure exactly just how nervous I was, but my palms were becoming damp with sweat. Even though I had known it could happen, I had always felt it was only a concept, only now was reality rapidly setting in. Even after living in this world for six years, I still hadn't gotten rid of my impression that "this is an otome game's world."

There was a quiet buzz around the hall before the meeting started. To me who was seated almost completely in Earl Terejia's shadow, as expected, many curious looks

were cast my way, it seems that “a child being in the House of Lords” was quite the news. It was different from the clearly disrespectful looks I had gotten at my birthday celebration.

Finally the nobles quieted down, and the clanging sound of a bell was heard from the center. It was as if ocean waves had calmed down and become like a still pond. Maybe it’s because most of the stained glass was blue, so that’s why the sea was the first image I thought of. Maybe he’s an official of some sort, a man rose up from the seats in the center and announced the beginning of today’s meeting, and that there were two items on today’s agenda.

“The first item, is with regards to refugees from the former Artolas Kingdom that are under temporary protection in the Jugfena royal domain, and what we should do with them. The second item, is going on military alert with regards to the conflict between the Shiru tribe and the Densel Dukedom’s army. Senior Earl Einsbark, please let us know about the refugees currently under your protection.”

“- At Fort Jugfena, there are approximately twelve hundred former residents of Artolas that are under our protection. We’ve loaned them tents to camp outside of Fort Jugfena with, and provided them with supplies from our stockpiles, but Fort Jugfena does not have enough food in reserve to keep this up for long. The number of people will probably keep increasing until autumn, and according to the refugees the women and children of the Shiru tribe are behind them and on their way. If another one thousand people arrive, our food stockpiles will be completely exhausted by the end of summer. We also don’t have enough tents. It’s already a situation where people are sleeping outside, exposed to the elements.”

Earl Einsbark was a tall, stocky figure in the prime of life, and his deep voice resounded throughout the entire hall, such as even I who was sitting in the back could hear him clearly.

“……That many people? As expected, it would have been better to expel them without offering our protection to begin with……”

Someone in the conference hall made the first comment. After that, a commotion began in the hall.

“No, they’re also people that believe in the same religion as us. We can’t just abandon them.”

“Even so, that’s back when we were the Ar Xia Holy Kingdom! Arxia is no longer a coalition of smaller countries united by the Xia sect!”

“When the Ar Xia church became the official state church, weren’t there independent noble lords incorporated into our territory at the time as well?”

“That’s all from more than fifty years ago.”

“While that is indeed from more than fifty years ago, the Arxia Kingdom was established more than six hundred years ago, and we’ve never forsaken those that believe in the same religion as us.”

“But, if we intervene in Densel’s civil war, Rindarl will have a cause to go to war with us.”

At once, debates flew around the conference hall as I listened, while Earl Terejia looked around, and shook his head at me. I understood it to mean that he was disappointed in the arguing nobles.

“It’s a dispute between the border nobles and the inner area nobles, is it?”

“The inland nobles lack a sense of danger. However, with regards to Rindarl, it won’t only be the borders that are in danger.”

Indeed, it’s mostly Jugfena and Genas that would be affected first if war was to break out with Rindarl, while their neighboring domains would hardly be affected. Of course, we’d also be in Jugfena and Genas’s situation.

“The ones that are watching out for our eastern neighbor Rindarl are mostly the northern domain lords, eh.”

The northern domain lords that I was referring to, were mostly the domain lords with territories bordering the northern sea. The northern nobles had paler skin as their characteristic, and even the children there sing that you shouldn’t provoke Rindarl.

“Without having to cross the Bandishia Plateau, it would be easier for Rindarl to face the less steep Amon Nor Mountains. With their troops already camped in Remeshu, they could cross the mountains by land and invade us by sea, pincering us. Although Densel isn’t known for its ships, Parmigran is known to trade with its southern neighbors for ships.”

“Does this mean that there’s no way to guard against Rindarl?”

“Defense spending has only been there in name for many years now.”

At the last piece of information that the earl had just mentioned, I nodded reflexively in understanding. With this, I finally understand the relations between the eastern Arxian nobles.

The lords of the smaller domains surrounding the royal capital, which I’ll call the inland domains faction, have very little army strength, and they severely lack a sense of impending crisis. They were mostly former priest nobles that had their own small inner domains, since they have plenty of money, they believe that if we accept refugees all they have to do is help spend some money. They can’t even imagine that the entire country would be embroiled in war because of helping people. Unlike the royal capital and the border domains that have more foreigners gather there, the inland domains are as if time has stopped and they’ve stagnated. Almost everyone among them were clamoring for accepting the refugees.

The border domains and the northern domains by the sea consider the influence of Rindarl uniting as their number one priority. Almost none of them agreed to accepting the refugees, if their own domains became a battleground, it would become necessary to invest all their surplus funds into land warfare or naval defense, they hoped that we could maintain a policy of non-intervention in the east. So of course, all of them would reject the refugees.

At the midst of this issue were the Jugfena royal domain, the Genas domain, the border domains faction and the inland domains faction, but most were silent and waiting for the decision of the House of Lords. Of course the Kaldia domain was among those waiting. There were both merits and demerits to accepting the refugees, and since the House of Lords is the most critical location for making defense decisions, it’s a rule here to not speak up irresponsibly.

The southern border domain lords have to maintain a different line of defense, so they’re the ones impacted the least. Because of this, they seemed almost indifferent to this issue, and remained silent while seeming to admire the conference hall.

“In the first place, we’re not in the era of fifty years ago. The refugees have no land or money, and they speak a different language. Even if we decide to take them in, which domain would accept them!”

One of the nobles got really heated up about the debate, and raised his voice in frustration. Everyone fell silent at his statement. Earl Terejia and I looked at each other, and he nodded quietly at me.

I held in my trembling the best I could, and took a deep breath.

“If it’s decided that the refugees will be accepted, then my domain can take them in.”

The voice I summoned wasn’t quite that loud, but it resounded clearly throughout the conference hall that had just fallen silent.

Chapter 20
An afternoon of being drained by fatigue

All eyes were suddenly focused on me. My heart was beating annoyingly fast to the point of being painful.

"……What's this?"

The first voice that spoke up was from Marquis Rittergau. He didn't hide the harsh tone of his voice. His attitude seemed so threatening, but I had to deal with my own fear.

"If it should be necessary, then my Kaldia domain can accept the refugees, as I just said."

I said it even more directly than earlier. After all, it would be Kaldia that's the most likely to be forced to accept them anyways. If I said that we'd accept them ahead of time, then I can get more favorable terms.

Marquis Rittergau didn't respond, and only looked at me in anticipation. I felt stifled by the pressure, and heavy silence fell again.

I counted to well above ten in my mind. During this entire time, Marquis Rittergau and I stared fixedly at each other. – And then, finally, the low whisper of the nobles stirred the air of the conference hall.

"- We should return to the main agenda now."

"Y, yes. Well then, Viscountess Kaldia has nominated herself as a candidate for accepting the refugees……"

With my speaking up at that timing, it seems to have beneficial for moving things along in the House of Lords. There had been almost no chance of any of the inland domains accepting the refugees, and I had put forth a practical proposal.

Although the northern nobles complained of concerns about Rindarl again, they were silenced by the priests talking about how the kingdom was founded with the precepts of accepting everyone in the Xia religious sects and the uproar it would cause if we didn't take in the refugees. In the first place, the Densel Dukedom had already virtually been Arxia's enemy already, so going to war with them wouldn't be that big of a surprise to our kingdom.

The border domain lords had already started a little on making military preparations, and at this rate the southeastern domain lords will probably go on full military alert status and receive the others' cooperation.

"Well then, starting next month, the Artolas refugees shall be moved to Viscountess Kaldia's domain in groups of fifty. Food supplies shall be provided by the Henznaut domain as well as the various lords in the Greenfield region, Margrave Genas shall provide twenty tents, and any more necessary shall be loaned by the Freche domain, Ruktoferd domain, and the Royal Army. We'll be counting on everyone."

In the end, other than the northern domains, most of the closer domains agreed to give some kind of support for the refugees. On top of that, quite a large amount of funds would be provided for us from the national treasury as well as the church.

The southeastern nobles, mostly the inland nobles among them, since this would probably stimulate their own economies, had rather cheerful expressions, but in return the northern nobles who were outnumbered and had lost their cause were glaring at them resentfully. It'll be better if this wound isn't too deep and we can all cooperate later, is what I hoped.

"Did the House of Lords meeting go well, Riliza-dono?"

"It's Eliza, Claudia-dono……"

Even though I was so exhausted after returning from the House of Lords, the first voice that greeted me upon returning was so carefree, someone with an unbelievable energetic voice. Outside the door of Earl Terejia's accommodations in the royal capital, this girl was spinning a spear about cheerfully. She was a real beauty, and her long golden hair was sparkling in the sunlight.

Even though I've corrected her so many times, she would always get my name wrong no matter how many times we spoke. At seeing the dazzling smile across her face, I felt as if it was adding insult to injury for my tired body and mind.

"Oh, I do apologize. It's just, I'm really bad with people's names……"

"Yes, I know that very well."

"Oh, okay. But anyways, did things go well at the House of Lords?"

Oh, okay, her answers were so casual, she seemed to always have no worries whatsoever. It's piling up even more on me! It's certain that her energeticness has caused my spirit to suffer even more damage in hit points.

This girl's name is Claudia Rolentsor, she's from that prestigious military family. She's the other companion that's staying in Kaldia with me alongside Elise Sherstok.

Probably due to how she was raised, she's been trained fully to become a knight and is doing it for real despite the rarity of it for women, while it had been rather difficult for me. Honestly speaking, it had been really tiring. By the way, this girl believes in doing everything fairly with the ideals of justice, believes in absolute integrity, and if it wasn't for how annoying her personality was, I could say that she's actually a really good person.

"Even though they don't speak our language, you're willing to accept them into your domain, I truly admire Eliza-dono's dauntlessness. Giving a helping hand to the weak without any pretension, such a wonderful just cause!"

"Um, rather than that, Claudia-dono, why would you happen to be here?"

Claudia welcomed me with an expression saying as if she belonged here, but when we had left the Kaldia domain two days ago, she should have remained back at the mansion. It takes two days for a horse-drawn carriage to get here, so why is she here?

"It's because Elise-dono wrote a letter to you. I rode all the way here to deliver it to you."

As Claudia absentmindedly made that statement, I felt the pain in my head increasing. What does it mean that she rode all the way here, a distance that takes a horse-drawn carriage two full days. I don't understand her. Even including my previous life, it's my

first time dealing with someone that's so difficult to comprehend. I have no idea on how to handle her.

"Well then, Eliza-dono, you're probably tired from constantly sitting down in the horse-drawn carriage and at the House of Lords. I'll loan you a spear, how about we loosen up your body with some spear practice?"

It seems that she was concerned for me, but what's with her proposal, I have no intention of exhausting myself into an early grave. As Claudia followed me to the garden in high spirits, no, uhh, she didn't seem to hear my rejections.

As a last resort, I looked at Earl Terejia to ask him for help, but he was just as tired as I was, and he only nodded as if to say to do my best.

……There's no helping it. I'll just have to play along with Claudia for a little bit.

Earl Terejia's garden here was covered with stone pavement rather than grass. That Claudia found her way here, I wonder if that means she also knew the earl from before. Because the ground is made of stone, don't swing your spear with full force here at me! But for some reason, when I said that to her, she smiled so happily, and nodded ambiguously at me.

"Eluza-dono is six years old now. I'm ten years older than you! I've just started learning the spear recently, so I hope to live up to Terejia ojii-san's and your expectations."

"I'm not Eluza, it's Eliza. I've heard that the Rolentsor family starts teaching the sword at the age of three, so why is that you're only learning the spear now?"

I wonder if something is fun about all this, Claudia's smile didn't slip at all, as she wound cloth strips around her hands. Since she has a custom-made spear for her, and there's no leather binding on her spear handle, it seems that she has to do this in order to prevent her hands from slipping.

"No, me and my older brothers started learning the sword at the age of two. I only started learning the spear after I turned seven."

She started learning the sword at the age of two, this answer made my cheeks twitch involuntarily. As expected of the Rolentsor noble family skilled in martial and military matters.

I warmed up for a few minutes according to Claudia's instructions, maybe it was actually good for refreshing my body, my body definitely felt a bit lighter. I've been so busy lately, so I haven't had much time to practice the spear, so this might actually be good.

But anyways, Claudia appears to be even more skilled with the spear than I expected. This is the first time I've actually practiced the spear together with her, although I had heard about her prowess from the soldiers after she came to the mansion, her family has really knightly behavior and that they're skilled in all sorts of martial arts is what I had figured. However, her skills with a spear, no matter how I look at it, seem to exceed even my teacher Gunther's level.

"How are they, my spear skills?"

"They seem to be better than my teacher's."

"Gunther, eh. Maybe my family's style is just too strong. If it's alright with Eliza-dono, we can fight together!"

While cleaning up after, Claudia still showed no signs of fatigue and was laughing happily. As expected, she's an incomprehensible person. Whether it's spear practice, or letting her stay in the mansion with me, I couldn't refuse her either. Well, she nodded, and suddenly changed her expression.

"I was wondering what to do if you had refused me. Since Terejia ojii-san had requested that I practice the spear with Eliza-dono, I've been trying my best on fulfilling my promise!"

Could it be, could it really be that he had been the cause of my spear practice just now. I was dumbfounded by Claudia's completely unexpected remark, and this time I completely lost all of my energy.

Chapter 21
Elise's letter

"Eh, we're staying here in the royal capital until tomorrow?"

"Yes. Tomorrow, I'm to attend a tea party and meet some nobles to make connections. After all, we couldn't even greet anyone at the House of Lords."

"So that's it. Then, I'll wait for you guys here tomorrow."

"No, you're attending as well. You'll be accompanying me as my retainer, is what the earl said."

We were staying at the earl's place, and we just finished a luxurious dinner served for the master of the house that had just returned after a long absence. Since Kamil didn't have noble status himself, he hadn't attended the meeting at the House of Lords earlier, and I had just informed him of our change in plans for tomorrow.

The two of us had remained in the dining hall after dinner to talk, while drinking the tea that the maids had brewed for me. With the influx of refugees and the incident of Viscount Galbaito's death, there were so many things that had to be done, I finally felt like I could relax a little bit for now.

"So, this means that the earl is seriously trying to make me into Charlie's retainer, right?"

"What are you saying, at this late hour. It was probably decided from the time that you accompanied me at my birthday celebration."

Kamil tilted his head slightly as if he had just realized it, but I was shocked at how late he seems to have recognized it himself. My birthday celebration wasn't about unveiling me only, but also showing who was going to become my vassal in the future.

"—. Mmm…… that's so. Sorry, it's nothing."

Kamil slowly shook his head. It was as if he was trying to rid himself of his thoughts. “I’m sorry to have said something strange,” said Kamil as he smiled, it felt like there was a mix of feelings, and for some reason my voice got stuck in my throat.

“Kamil -”

“Excuse me! Eija-dono, I’ve brought your letter!”

The words that I was about to say were interrupted by a certain someone rudely rushing into the dining hall without even knocking. Even though it’s after eating, Claudia was like a typhoon and showed no decrease in her energy level at all, and she had charged straight into the dining hall. And what’s more, this time, she’s gotten my name completely off the mark.

“C, Claudia-dono?”

“I’m so sorry! Elise-dono’s letter that she entrusted me with, I forgot about it until now!”

She headed straight for me and held out an envelope right in front of my face, and she rushed so fast that she ran right into the chair’s backrest. It’s good that there had been a cushion, but if this had been a normal chair, it surely would have left quite a bump.

“T, thanks……”

“No, no, I’m being taken care of by you now, so something like this is nothing to me!”

You’re declaring that this is nothing, but no matter how I look at it, it’s impossible for covering two days worth of distance on horseback by yourself all in order to deliver a letter to be considered “no big deal.” As expected, I don’t understand this girl.

As I received the letter, I could clearly feel my cheek twitching again. – At that moment, I suddenly recalled a phrase from my previous life. That’s right, her sort of action is known as “ruining the mood.”

Kamil next to me had fallen into stunned silence at the sudden intruder. Oh yeah, come to think of it Kamil hasn’t talked much with Claudia before, and he probably didn’t even know that she was already here today. Uwaa…… I had no room in my heart for squealing like that.

“You’re having tea together after dinner? Can I join in?”

Why does her expression seem so excited and sparkling at a few mere teacups on the table, I wonder. Just as I was about to sigh and say something, Claudia already flew off somewhere.

“I still haven’t even said anything yet……”

“……Eh, wasn’t that Claudia-sama? Why was she here? Come to think of it, how did she get here?”

Kamil seems to have finally accepted the situation in front of him for reality, and finally spoke up in a rather confused voice. That’s…… before I had time to explain the situation to him, Claudia returned here from the hallway. She had a mountain of sweets in her right arm, while her left hand was dragging along a maid with a teacup and saucer.

In the end, we were forced to accompany Claudia, and drank tea until it was so late at night that we were reprimanded by the maids. Such a small child is still up at this time! is what the old maid said as she pointed at me glared at Claudia, maybe she knew Claudia from before as well, there was no mercy in her lecture. As expected, even Claudia slunk out of the room as if she had wilted, and I took my letter as Kamil and I returned to our rooms.

It’s now late at night, but there’s still things I want to do before I sleep. I sat at the writing desk with a piece of paper, and opened an ink bottle in order to begin writing a reply.

“Ah……”

Unluckily, there had been cracks in the film sealing the ink bottle, and the ink spilled. It got all over my right hand, the desk, and partially on the paper I had just brought out. I sighed as I wiped myself and the desk with a cloth. I couldn’t get the ink out of the paper, oh well, paper is used for writing on anyways.

And so I finally began to read Elise’s letter, her handwriting was quite slender, I felt like I could tell how weak she was even through the way she used a pen.

After beginning with a standard greeting that conformed to noble etiquette, she began talking about how she's began walking around outside, what she's seen, about herself, and her interactions with the people in the mansion. It was very Elise-like, nothing but gentle scenes with a peaceful heart.

As I continued reading the letter, the topic changed to worry about me and how busy I've been the past few days.

Unlike Claudia who moved about freely outside the mansion, the last time I had seen the sickly Elise had been on the day I received the news about the refugees. It's only natural for her to be worried.

It's not really that good for a girl who's supposed to have come here for recuperation to be worrying about me. Even a little bit of stress can cause her illness to become worse.

I wrote an appropriate reply, and just in case I missed something, I checked over Elise's letter again. There seems to have been a postscript written casually on the back of the letter, so I scanned its contents.

P.S. I would like to meet Eliza-sama's distant relative, Elise-sama. I heard from Bellway-sama that she also has a weak body like me. Since she's also named Elise and is sickly as well, I'm really curious……

Just what exactly is that Bellway doing.

I entrusted him with the care of the child locked up in the innermost part of the mansion, but I didn't expect that he would make the mistake of allowing the person with the name she's borrowed, Elise, to find out about her.

Of course there had been a reason for me to go to the trouble of allowing guests, and then giving the same name to that child. It's in order to not give accurate information about the mansion to the outside.

Because she had a weak body, the original Elise would be limited from meeting people, and the child that was nominally sick and had the same name was also limited in the contact allowed to her. It's because I want to limit the knowledge of that child's existence as much as possible.

With two sickly Elises in the mansion at the same time, if information ever leaks outside, it could be confusing to others. If it's an ambiguous story, the information about the Elise that's been entrusted to me will be mixed with that child's information. That's what I'm aiming for.

Of course, there was no way I could let the original Elise know about it herself. But, it seems that the other "Elise's" existence has already been exposed to her. This won't be easy to hide anymore.

……Elise and Maya, will be returning to the Sherstok domain after at most three years. During this time, as long as Elise remains in my demesne, and doesn't leave the mansion, hopefully it won't be a big problem.

While praying that more information about that child wouldn't become more widespread, I ignored Elise's postscript. Since it had been written all the way on the back, a reply wasn't expected.

Chapter 22
Earl Terejia's social circle

The sunlight was streaming down at the end of spring, on a neatly arranged assortment of sweets on the garden table, but I only listened to the female noble in front of me while occasionally responding to her.

Sitting across from me, chattering away for the last hour was Senior Viscountess Daniela Felhi-Berendorf, aunt to Senior Baron Felhi, a financial minister of the palace, and she was a domain lord from the Artsbelf region northwest of the royal palace.

"Anyways, that knight really couldn't read the mood! Choosing something like earrings to give a woman, he really lacks consideration!"

Since Earl Terejia was currently boating on the pond with the other male nobles, and other than the servants, only this woman was left with me, but her topics weren't really something that would be meant for a six year old. I wonder if she's actually saying all this to Kamil standing behind me who was being so still all this time like a statue.

At nineteen years old, she was actually younger than her nephew Baron Felhi, she had gotten married at sixteen and became a widow last year when her husband passed away, and she was only interested in the romance gossip between men and women at the royal palace.

Since her husband had passed away, she inherited his position and became the Viscountess of a small domain near the royal capital, but she left its management almost entirely up to her head steward, and it seems that she lives here in the royal capital instead.

Having her dumped on me as my conversation partner without taking into consideration the difference between our ages, of course this had to be an episode from my entrance into the florid noble society. She started from which young noblemen were nice and handsome, and continued with who seemed to getting along with each other and who danced with who. And currently, she's getting heated up after she reached the topic of recalling about various unfortunate men.

“Ahh…… Is it that bad to give women earrings as a present?”

“It’s common sense for western nobles. Earrings should given from a woman to the man they love. For men, they usually only gift them to other men as a sign of true friendship.”

“I understand, so that’s how it was.”

What’s with this custom. A man giving another man an accessory as a sign of true friendship, seems like such a mysterious custom to me, so I replied reflexively with a perfunctory answer.

“It’s a venerable tradition. In the ancient story about Ugaria’s knights, two men who shared an earring each would protect each other’s backs on the battlefield.”

What’s with this, I wonder if this was a roundabout way of expressing homosexuality back in the day for them?

Two men sending accessories to each other, no matter how I look at it, I can’t see it as simply declaring true friendship to each other. When I nonchalantly checked Kamil’s expression as he stood behind me, he seemed slightly uncomfortable, and he didn’t really seem convinced either. It seems that my sense was most likely accurate.

However, if there really are records of the country that came before the Holy Ar Xia Kingdom, Ugaria, then it does make sense that such a custom is present in western Arxia.

Western Arxia has a strong sense for preserving traditions and customs from the Ugarian era. Since the Jugfena region has its own customs left by ancient times, probably the entirety of Arxia is like that as well.

“That’s why, for a man to give a woman earrings as a present, is like declaring he doesn’t see her as a woman. If only he had ever been to the royal capital, of course he should have known!”

As Viscountess Berendorf got even more heated up while remembering that man, I just replied is that so, and pretended to be taking her seriously. Right now, Earl Terejia is probably speaking to her nephew Baron Felhi about the main issue, and I was only speaking with her just in case.

When the nobles returned from their boating trip, today's tea party changed locations to a different house for dinner.

Today's goal was to get as much financial assistance from the kingdom as possible from the financial minister Baron Felhi and his noble colleagues, and since the earl had already contacted them about the issue via pigeon before, today we're here to greet them as a matter of courtesy.

In fact, it seems that we're staying here for an extra day in the royal capital specially so that I can make some connections with the nobles in the royal capital. Since we had accounted for an extra day's time while visiting the royal capital, this is no problem.

"What happened?"

"There's no problem. Originally, I had loaned money to their fathers several times before as well."

Earl Teresia unceremoniously returned with a nonchalant tone of voice. This earl, he didn't simply have connections, he used debts from their parents' generation to choose collaborators to work with this time, eh. Even I felt slightly chilly at his outstanding competence and abilities.

For something he did a generation ago to still have such a large impact, noble society must be indeed completely interconnected. When I thought about how he managed to increase the budget for financial support from the kingdom for the refugees to 1.5 times its original amount, I carved how important these types of things were into my memory.

The tea party during the day had been at Viscount Avon's older sister's house, and when we hurriedly joined the private dinner at Earl Trada's house, we received a rather strange level of welcome for just Earl Terejia.

Well, after all, Earl Terejia is the younger brother of Marquis Rittergau, who is the prime minister as well as the Terejia family head. While he's in the countryside now, there's still probably many people that want a good relation with him simply because of who his older brother is.

As if to prove me right, Earl Terejia was immediately surrounded by people, while Kamil and I went around greeting the important nobles courteously, then Claudia

joined us for some reason, and the three of us quietly had some food in a corner of this venue.

“W, why isn’t Charlie wearing a dress and you’re in knight attire instead?”

“There’s no time or money to get a complete set of dresses or accessories. Besides, in the House of Lords it’s been determined that the proper wear for minors should be knight attire.”

As we enjoyed the beef braised in red wine, I answered Kamil who seemed to be smirking for some reason with today’s excuse.

In Arxia, males have priority for succession to the peerage, so there wasn’t even a precedent where an underage girl has succeeded to the peerage before. Normally there would be more relatives. In my case, since my father had done his best to eradicate all his own relatives apart from his children, I was in the unusual situation of ending up being the only person with inheritance rights. Come to think of it, although he’s my father, that person might end up in the history books as one of the most evil villains ever.

So because of that, birthday celebrations for nobles with peerage had only rules for boys, and their formal wear was supposed to be knight attire for the same reason. And since I feel that wearing dresses is troublesome, it’s actually something I welcome.

“How nice, Elise-dono. I’d also like to be in knight attire rather than my dress.”

“My name’s not Elise, it’s Eliza.”

This time Claudia had mixed up my name with Elise’s, and she was wearing a sky blue dress. She’s tall and slender with a nice figure, she’s quite an eye-catching beauty. Since she usually liked to dress in men’s shirts and shorts to move about easier, today’s was a rare appearance for her. However, just like usual she had a mountain of food on her plates, and there was nothing ladylike about her.

And so, we spent some time chatting and having light-hearted fun, but Kamil who had been laughing suddenly fixed his line of sight on someone.

“……Ah, he saw us, Charlie. Over there.”

“Hm?”

I looked over at the direction he indicated. Someone unexpected was standing there, what's this, I turned around reflexively, he noticed me looking at him as well, and he smiled mysteriously just like before.

It was Margrave Molton.

His beautiful silver hair was shining brilliantly under the light of the chandelier.

Chapter 23
The children loving margrave

Just as I was beginning to get tired of the overly luxurious food at the dinner party and was getting a little drowsy, the nobles from farther away began leaving as well. While waiting for Earl Terejia who was still surrounded by nobles, Kamil, Claudia, and I remained in the corner and poked at what remained of the food. Although we had free time, we weren't bored. There were so many nobles here that I've never met before. While observing their elegance, I learned who each of them were, as this was absolutely necessary in order for me to seriously enter their society later in the future.

And so while I was quietly sipping my tea, Kamil suddenly froze up.

"What's the matter?"

"Margrave Molton is coming over this way."

He said so in almost a whisper as he kept his line of sight fixed on the margrave, and indeed Margrave Molton who had just been talking calmly with the other nobles from the royal capital was now walking leisurely in this direction. He was also looking at us, and our eyes met as if he had nothing to hide.

As expected, he was smiling without seeming to have any bad intentions. Without any hesitation, he came to our location, and he encouraged the shorter man following behind him to step in front.

I remembered the face of this man who seemed slightly troubled. He was introduced to me at my birthday party by Earl Terejia as a senior viscount who was a secretary at the royal palace.

"How do you do, Viscountess Kaldia?"

"Greetings and how do you do, Viscount Gribell. Thank you very much for having taken the trouble to attend my birthday celebration."

"No, it was my pleasure."

As he nodded, the viscount's expression seemed like he was seeing something strange. I wonder if it's because I'm not talking like a child. Since it's been so long since I was actually a child, even though I have some idea of what it's like, it's difficult for me to act like one. Because it's easier than having to pretend, I've become like this now.

However, because of this, the viscount now seems to be considering how to speak to me. It would be rude if he was too direct with what he really wanted without at least making some conversation first. As a result, he missed the timing for his next sentence and silence had fallen upon the conversation for a bit.

"……At my birthday celebration, thank you very much for the grape juice. I'll have to hold off on trying the wine until I become an adult."

"Ah, it's fine. I'm glad that you were able to enjoy it."

I managed to remember back to my birthday celebration in order to continue the conversation. Viscount Gribell had given me a set of both grape juice and red wine, since many other nobles had simply given alcohol, his consideration for me still being a minor had left an impression.

Viscount Gribell had such a relieved expression when I continued the conversation. He glanced at Margrave Molton who was now behind him, then spoke up again.

"Since it was from the Freche region, I felt that you'd enjoy it. My younger brother is currently serving Earl Garlof as a squire."

"When you say Earl Garlof……"

"Junior Earl Robert Garlof is Margrave Freche's younger brother. When my older brother was in school, he got to know Margrave Freche, which is why my younger brother got to serve Earl Garlof as an apprentice page, and now he's become a squire."

"I see, how fortunate for him."

"Yes, yes. School is the perfect place for fated meetings. After all, studying together for three years, can cultivate deeper relationships. ……Ah, come to think of it. Viscountess Kaldia, I'd like to introduce my friend from school to you."

He's finally gotten to the point, as I sighed mentally at how roundabout the conversation was, by all means, I consented. It feels like meaningless chatter accounts

for eighty percent of talking between nobles. I haven't really interacted with many nobles other than Earl Terejia, so I'm unused to this kind of interaction.

"This is my friend from school, Margrave Molton."

Viscount Gribell stepped to the side to make way for the man with him. The man bowed, and lightly shook his silver hair. As I saw his face from up close, I felt like he was really quite the handsome young man.

"Pleased to meet you, Margrave Molton. I would like to give thanks to the gods that I was able to meet you here today. I apologize for my rudeness in not greeting you the other day."

"All good, Viscountess Kaldia. It is I who should have apologized for not greeting you despite it being a celebration for you. I should be the one thanking the gods."

I didn't expect the major noble from the northwest, Margrave Molton to approach me so directly, and while I pretended to remain calm, I was actually in turmoil inside.

It wouldn't hurt to stay slightly longer in the royal capital to make some connections, but even though he had accepted the invitation to my birthday celebration, why is he only greeting me here at this late hour.

Unluckily, right now Earl Terejia is quite far away and busy accompanying the other nobles. It couldn't be, was he aiming for when the earl would be too busy to pay attention to me? I wondered what Margrave Molton wanted from me as he smiled gently, I wasn't able to read his intentions. I was nervous to the point where I was about to break out into a cold sweat.

"You don't have to be so stiff around me. I have a son the same age as you. As a parent, I just wanted to talk to someone who was the same age as my son."

Margrave Molton's cheerful statement exceeded my comprehension capacity as I was being too vigilant and nervous.

……Son!?

I had been so high-strung that I broke myself.

As Margrave Molton began talking about his son being the same age as me and being the right age for a playmate, and asked what kinds of things I was learning, I could only feel like as if it were an out of body experience, as I had lost all my energy due to my own feelings of how stupid I'd been.

The reason for his mysterious smiles seems to have been because it was his way of encouraging children to work hard. That's what I had detected at my birthday celebration. But it was natural I'd misunderstand since I hadn't seen such an expression until today.

In the end, it seems that Margrave Molton has a soft spot for children and he's taken a liking to me. Since he's come to the royal capital to do business with the merchants here and sell daily necessities, I got a promise from him to sell those to us cheaply.

And since we needed to make many bulk purchases to help the refugees set up the foundations for what they would need to live in my domain, there's no reason to turn down an offer to be able to buy things cheaply. When Earl Terejia was finally free from all those nobles, he seemed very pleased as well, so it seems that I didn't do something unnecessary.

"Come to think of it, even if Kamil didn't say anything, Claudia-dono kept quiet as well."

Claudia's father has quite a low social status among the prestigious Rolentsor family. Even prestigious families will have nobles without peerage due to having too many people. For those like Claudia that won't succeed to the peerage, nobles without their own lands often have to find governmental work. Due to the family's status and influence in the military, it's relatively easy for Rolentsor to find work for the Royal Army. Compared to me, Claudia's social status is actually much lower than mine, but even so it could be useful to keep a connection to the Rolentsor family.

"That's because! I'm aiming to become a knight, so it's different from you guys. Father told me that once I'm twenty, I'm free to enter the knights and do whatever I like, but since I have to do it with loans and I'm already mostly cut off from my relatives, it'll actually be more like from when I'm thirteen. Shouldn't you know this already?"

Urgh, although Claudia was proudly puffing out her chest, I had to conceal how much her story actually troubled me. Looking at the current situation, there would probably

not be much of a bright future waiting for Claudia by the time she turns twenty. Judging by both her age and personality, I don't think she'll be easy to marry off, either. However, for Earl Terejia to have gone to the trouble of bringing her here, with how strong her spear skills are, and the fact that she's still a Rolentsor, I feel like maybe she can actually make it as a knight before she turns twenty.

"……Arxia has never had a female knight up until now."

As if to answer the question in my mind, Earl Terejia secretly whispered that to me. I see, then she has quite a difficult path ahead of her. In that case, then the earl's aim can only be one thing. Claudia will enter the knights, so that she doesn't become a burden forever on this household.

Chapter 24
Won't tomorrow come quicker?

With so much going on, there was no time to leisurely take two days returning by horse-drawn carriage. Socializing should be something fun and relaxing? Socializing isn't something so simple for nobles. While riding horses for the entire day and switching them once in a town on our way, I arrived back in the Kaldia domain on the same night in a terribly exhausted state.

Of course, as a child I didn't have the strength to control my horse for an entire day, so Kamil and Claudia had taken turns riding with me.

"What happened while we were gone?"

On behalf of Earl Terejia, his secretary Bellway had been in charge during our absence. Even after returning there was no time to rest our weary bodies, we had to immediately make large scale preparations for receiving the refugees we agreed to accept, although the earl was the one with the real power, and he immediately headed for the domain lord's office. Claudia headed for the training grounds, I wonder how it's possible for her to have all that excess energy……

Bellway reported that everything was the same and not much happened, and that there has been no particularly noticeable change for Elise and Maya who have moved in recently, or for the new nanny that's now mostly in charge of taking care of Elise.

"Then, about the matter of the 'ojou-sama……'"

Bellway gingerly began his report about why Elise had found out and written me that postscript. Bellway and the servants call that child "ojou-sama" so that it's easier to differentiate.

"My deepest apologies. The other day, when I went out, Elise-sama slipped out for a little bit."

"I know. Elise wrote about that in her letter. Well, I have an affinity for deceiving people. From now on, if Elise ever asks about that child, send her to me. I'll trick her well."

As I expected, the main issue was about that child. For information control on the child in the future, I have to be able to control the earl's secretary Bellway. Since this mansion has relatively few people in it and he's the one in charge of keeping track of everything, letting Elise find out about her, this is clearly his fault. It's a mistake that's rare of him.

As I instructed him about future correspondence, and was about to ask him if there was anything else to report, Bellway suddenly lowered his head deeply for some reason.

"I'm truly, deeply sorry about all this. To have betrayed Eliza-sama's trust…… No matter how you punish me, I'm prepared for it."

There was so much passion for his work in his voice. ……As I looked at him bowing his head towards me, I felt it must be hard as well to be the earl's secretary, and felt something like pity for him.

Since Earl Terejia doesn't like having more staff than necessary, Bellway actually does more than just secretarial work without complaint. He was often asked to deal with troublesome work, and he's even lowering his head to a child that's not even half his size, it must be quite the stressful job.

Taking this into consideration, there's quite a lot of emotional distance between me and Bellway. It's also quite surreal to be looking up at someone bowing their head to me.

"……The one putting trust in you, isn't me but Earl Terejia. There won't be any punishment from me."

Asking Bellway to take care of that child while we were gone, was because nobody else in the mansion had been qualified to take charge, and also because he's already received instructions from the earl on the matter. Although I had indeed been the one to request Bellway on this matter directly, but that's only because I'm the one taking responsibility for the care of that child. Saying something like he betrayed my expectations, but I had never really relied on him that much in the first place.

As Bellway was lost for words, I confirmed the contents of his report. As if he was protesting my decision to not punish him, Bellway had an expression that almost seemed sad, quite different from his usual steely mask.

Eastern Kaldia is still quite undeveloped, with a large unpopulated lake area. I plan to have the accepted refugees live there.

They're farmers, just like the people in my domain. Since there is no already established farmland to grant them, as newcomers they'll have to do irrigation work for their own land. With effort that environment should be inhabitable for people, and it'll be good for the domain as well since we lack fishermen, and setting the long-term goal as learning how to cultivate rice from other water-rich domains should be attainable as well. This project might continue on until the next generation, but even so Kaldia will be accepting the refugees because I can see future returns.

The most obvious benefit would be the pumpkin. Among the refugees, they have pumpkin seeds with them for negotiating new land to live on. Because I'm worried about changing the ecosystem, I've put a limit on the types of new crops that the refugees will be allowed to cultivate, for now I'll just use the pumpkins as a new crop type that the refugees brought with them.

I was planning to use their potatoes as well, but it seems that because Kaldia has soil with high water content, that it's not suitable for potatoes. What I remember from my previous life, is that pumpkins seem to be rather nutritious and would make a good crop. Since my domain only plants grain crops, hopefully adding pumpkin crops will help the people's overall nutrition.

Also, another great benefit would be expanding the labor force. Since people hardly ever move to the Kaldia domain from other domains, it's hard for us to start big projects due to a lack of labor force. Because the citizens of my domain have their hands full with planting the crops they need to survive, this domain has basically stagnated.

So even though I wanted to do something about the eastern lake areas of my domain, there hasn't been any progress for several years. It's because I've had to wait for a surplus in the labor force as everyone is currently busy with maintaining their fields.

In that case, since receiving the refugees would mean having a large number of new citizens, I can think of them as a surplus labor force.

There won't be any disputes with my original citizens since they'll be living at different locations, and since they speak different languages anyways it'll be difficult

for any types of disputes to arise. Since they can't communicate, they probably won't have anything to fight over.

But, their children's generation will definitely have to learn the Arxian language. I already talked to Earl Terejia about it, that we'll be needing to teach those that are currently too young to join in the irrigation project. Also in order to incorporate the technique to raise rice as well, their children and grandchildren will absolutely have to speak the Arxian language so that everyone can be unified.

After all, they can't keep being referred to as refugees forever. After we accept them, their new identity shall be citizens of the Kaldia domain. We should start calling them the new citizens, I'll talk with the earl about that tomorrow.

As I thought carefully over accepting the refugees, I was interrupted.

"You happen to still be awake?"

"……Mrs. Hortensia."

The woman who opened the door and entered seemed slightly surprised.

In place of Mrs. Galton who was fired, she's the new nanny, Mrs. Hortensia. There was no light illuminating the darkness, and I could only hear her sound.

"It won't be good for your body to stay up much longer."

"I understand. I'll go to sleep."

"That's good, then. You sometimes forget that you're still only six years old."

I was a bit startled at Mrs. Hortensia's remark. It's because she was right on the mark.

"Even if you've matured early, your body hasn't kept up with you. You should eat well, sleep well, and exercise well, so that your body doesn't become weak."

I understand, was my reply, and Mrs. Hortensia left the room after saying what she wanted to say.

Mrs. Hortensia isn’t as annoying as Mrs. Galton was, but it’s difficult to grasp her personality, and that was my assessment of the new nanny that’s come here to the mansion.

Chapter 25
Kamil Novak

I woke up even though it was still dark outside.

It wasn't cold to the point where it woke me up, but it was chilly enough to chase away any drowsiness. Since I don't like laying around in bed when I'm wide awake, I grudgingly got out from under my warm covers.

When I looked at the water clock in my room, it was much earlier than I normally would get up. Since I hate the idea of catching a cold, I immediately put on my dalmatic.

Since I hate having nothing to do, I decided to take a walk in the mansion.

There should be no problem as long as I return before Mrs. Hortensia wakes up, I thought the same thing as before like on a certain morning so long ago.

Rashiok who was sleeping beside the water clock raised his head. Growl~~, a whining sound came from his throat that indicated he wanted to be spoiled, and I took him with me on the condition that he promised to be quiet.

Since the curtains haven't been opened yet, the hallways were just as dark as my room. Since Rashiok has night vision and acted almost like a guide dog, helping me avoid obstacles, bringing him along was quite useful.

As a domain lord's residence, the Mansion of Golden Hills is considered quite small, so there's not actually that many rooms. Since the barracks next door is actually larger, it makes one wonder which should actually be the domain lord's residence. In order to manage the people in the eastern part of my domain, calmly taking things into consideration it might be best to build a new small city in the center of the domain, as I currently live in the western part of Kaldia.

If war with Rindarl becomes actuality, we'd have to build a new military facility anyways. If results can be shown from us training cavalry troops, the House of Lords will surely support us and further strengthen our army.

I kept my right hand on Rashiok's belly as he trotted along, and I wondered if I actually knew where I was going, when Rashiok suddenly snorted. And then, as if he was troubled by something, he rubbed his nose against my face, and pushed against my back.

By now Rashiok has matured, and he's at the size where his mouth can easily chomp off my head with a single bite. I can really feel how big he's getting, and when he stopped to look at me I gave him a gentle glance.

I saw someone's shadow, and I immediately hid in Rashiok's own shadow. Since Rashiok is taller than I am, it was simple to hide completely in his shadow.

"……Hm, is that Rashiok?"

The person walking down the hallway seems to have noticed Rashiok in the dimness. Rashiok growled softly in reply, and the person went into a room without paying mind to Rashiok. The voice was Bellway's. After thinking about it for a bit, I finally realized that we're close to Earl Terejia's room.

But, isn't it still a bit early for the earl to be up? I had my doubts, and decided to remain here for a bit. After doing it once before, I've acquired quite the bad hobby of enjoying eavesdropping.

From the earl's room, I eventually heard the two of them talking in subdued voices. They talked about the plans for today, and the reports on the pigeons that arrived last night. Getting up this early, must be due to the dedication they're putting in about the matter of accepting the refugees.

I didn't know about such a thing, because I'm still getting up at the same time as usual. Even normally, Earl Terejia overworks himself for his old age, and now he's adding even more to his burden. I can only pray that he doesn't collapse from overwork.

I thought I understood Earl Terejia's reason for rising early, and was about to return to my room.

"Alright, so about Eliza-sama yesterday……"

Bellway mentioned my name, and I raised my hand to signal Rashiok to stop. I felt like he was going to report on my conversation with him yesterday, and I was interested in how he would talk about me with the earl.

Bellway's voice became even more hushed, he seemed to be whispering yesterday's conversation to the earl. His voice was so low that it was difficult to hear him clearly.

"……I don't trust the future master."

Bellway's voice seemed agitated as he returned to a normal speaking volume, and I could hear him clearly. The future master would of course be referring to me. I wonder if the earl intends to have his servants work for me in the future.

Out of all the servants in the mansion, only Bellway was from noble society. Bellway's father had been a titled knight, but since a titled knight was only an honorary position, it's not something that can obtain peerage. Unlike nobles that can retain their nobility throughout the generations despite not having peerage, there's a law that states once a titled knight dies, all their children will no longer be considered to have a noble's rights.

With people like this, if I lose Earl Terejia's protection, I might suddenly find myself without any retainers.

"You're not the only one."

Earl Terejia replied in a low voice that was like a sigh. It felt as if it sounded bitter.

"She doesn't trust me at all. She's been using Kamil and the soldiers and maids to collect information on the villagers."

……As expected, that was exposed. As the years passed and the number of people around me increased, for me to go and gather information without using any of them, that does indeed seem like evidence that I don't trust the earl.

Earl Terejia and I have a relationship of mutual benefit where we use each other rather than a trusting relationship.

That's why he had been in charge of rebuilding my domain, and why he had participated in the early stages of the refugee acceptance plan as well. He's also using this as a chance to get rid of his own subordinates that are too troublesome to use and passing them along to me. What's more, all the grain that the Kaldia domain produces, goes through the Terejia family, and is sold by merchants affiliated with the Terejias. This could be said that it's an excellent monopoly deal for him. It's basically like I'm

loaning the domain to him until I become of age since he's a noble without lands of his own. There were plenty of advantages to be had from this relationship for both of us.

Since all the servants in the mansion were hired by and signed contracts with Earl Terejia, isn't this evidence that he doesn't need to build a trusting relationship with me. For future things, he won't necessarily need me to do anything or require my trust to do what he wants.

Something like my trust, I wonder just how much it's worth. As I was furrowing my brows, Earl Terejia and Bellway's conversation continued.

"Then, Kamil also doesn't trust her?"

……Kamil, huh. I slightly ground my teeth.

He was originally a soldier in training from the army, and he used to have a life as a merchant's son. I'd heard that his father died, but if things were so simple he should have inherited his father's riches. While he was a soldier in training, he was selected to assist me, and just like that he's always stayed by my side, but I don't know the true reasons for it.

What will they talk about, I concentrated even more on this topic. I'd definitely like to clear up some unknown factors.

As I listened, the earl's next words were over in an instant.

"Ahh, that might be. If he knew that his father had been the merchant that poisoned the family he's now serving, he might not be able to leave things as is."

The merchant that had taken the blame for poisoning my father had been Kamil's father.

I immediately paled, and my head was spinning around. My vision was flickering, and I collapsed against Rashiok. I was beginning to break out into a cold sweat.

That's because, it's my fault that his father died. I was the one who killed my father. But the one who was accused of and executed for the crime, was the merchant that had sold my parents the food for the party.

It felt like my heart was about to burst out of my chest. And even though it was cold, I was sweating.

……I had only heard that he was a villainous merchant. Although Kamil hardly ever talked about his father, I could tell from his expression that he still missed him.

If Kamil ever discovers that I'm the true culprit. A chill ran down my spine.

He might have been serving me all this time without looking for any benefits in return.

Urgh…… I couldn't make a sound, as it felt like I was choking on some sensation. I feel terribly dizzy. My temple was aching in pain.

I somehow managed to lift my trembling fingers, and poked Rashiok's back three times. Rashiok understood what I wanted and laid down on the floor so I could get on him.

As I somehow managed to endure the feeling of being sick while riding him and not throw up, Rashiok silently brought me back to my room.

Chapter 26
A rainy day

"Have Claudia join your domain's army?"

"Yes, rather than always being a freeloading house guest, have her join the army as a way of repaying my favor, and become my bodyguard. What do you think?"

The weather had changed this morning, and right now it's raining heavily. Despite the Kaldia domain being water rich, it doesn't rain that often. As the rain made tapping sounds against the windows of the domain lord's office, Earl Terejia blinked several times at my sudden proposal.

"……Once a little more time had passed and you'd gotten to known each other better, I was going to suggest something like that as well."

"Then I believe, we can send Kamil east for developing the lands there?"

If Claudia becomes my bodyguard, then I can move around Kamil who's been my bodyguard up until now. Moving Kamil at this timing, it's convenient because someone will be needed to take charge of constructing the village for the refugees. With an understanding of cultures other than Arxia's and the ability to get along with others easily, Kamil who should have Earl Terejia's complete trust would be the perfect person to take charge of constructing the village. Since I wouldn't have a personal bodyguard if I send him off somewhere else, I plan to have Claudia take his place.

Earl Terejia nodded repeatedly, and agreed as I expected.

"Claudia-dono's already hanging out at the barracks quite often. For the soldiers as well that had seemed a little down at my birthday celebration, having Claudia officially join them would probably raise their spirits."

There were many soldiers that were deeply impressed with Claudia's prowess with a spear. In the first place, the soldiers in my domain have a bit of an attitude of respecting the strong. That's why there were no complaints about the young Gunther being an officer above the older veterans.

And since most of them had been former bandits, Gunther included, they have very little resistance against women. There had been many women amongst the bandits, it seems there had been people following some strong women as well in the bandit group where the strong ruled.

If I'm not mistaken, Claudia will definitely be helpful for me controlling my domain's army.

"I want to allow the refugees currently suffering outside Fort Jugfena to be able to become citizens of my domain as soon as possible. I would have no objections to having Claudia become my bodyguard and sending Kamil to be in charge. If it's Kamil, with his skills, he would definitely be able to oversee it successfully."

"Eliza……?"

As I summed up my thoughts on the matter, for some reason the earl suddenly seemed a bit confused. As if to peek into my mind, Earl Terejia's black pupils looked directly into my eyes. I felt as if he could see straight into my heart, and avoided his gaze by looking at the window, while Earl Terejia shut his eyes, and seemed to be thinking about something for a while.

"……Nothing. Mmm, you're right. I'll immediately have a word with Claudia, and instruct Kamil to take charge of constructing the village."

"Very well then. I'll go and call Claudia-dono right now."

I bowed, and exited the office. From behind me, I could hear him saying "you don't look well, you should get some rest after this." I know that more than well about myself. After all, my stomach and head have been aching since this morning, and if I'm not careful I feel like I could throw up at any moment.

Even Claudia was actually staying inside quietly on a day such as this when it's raining so heavily, so I visited the room given to her, and she greeted me back in a voice that seemed to be much lower tension than usual.

Claudia's room had almost no personal possessions in it at all. When she came here, she had basically almost nothing besides the clothes on her back. Since her room is basically the exact opposite of Elise's, it left an impression on me. The iron spear wrapped in cloth leaning against the wall was the only personal possession of Claudia who's currently rolling around on her bed.

“What would you happen to be doing, Claudia-dono?”

“I can’t be any more bored than this. Usually it doesn’t rain this heavily, but today I’m stuck in the house with absolutely nothing to do.”

Claudia was the very personification of having nothing to do, and she was now sitting along the edge of her bed while kicking her feet. She had a totally dissatisfied expression as she complained about her boredom to me, and the way her lips were protruding made her seem like a little kid.

“If you would like, I’ll have a maid prepare the items necessary so you can sew.”

I couldn’t help but tease her a little to get her back for her thick headedness, as I proposed something that would be very ordinary for most girls’ hobbies, sewing when it’s rainy outside. Although, I’m absolutely sure that Claudia won’t be interested in something like that at all.

“……That’s, could it be? Did you find out that I hate sewing more than anything else so you’re teasing me with such a suggestion?”

“No, of course not.”

I figured that she would only reject me without noticing my intent, but I was surprised that it turns out Claudia absolutely hates sewing. I turned slightly red, and was rather shocked inside. Claudia’s surprisingly good at reading others. If this had been the normal Claudia that’s always hyperactive, not only would she not be able to read the atmosphere, she sometimes might not even notice what other people are saying.

She had stopped kicking her feet, and now, with her lower lip slightly sticking out, just the fact that she’s stopped moving really makes her seem like a lady from a good family because of her elegant features. Usually I can’t see her like this…… Somehow, it’s actually disappointing that I don’t see her like this more often.

“Jokes aside, Earl Terejia would like to talk to you. Could you go to the domain lord’s office?”

“Alright, let’s go!”

Claudia seemed glad to have the chance to get up and move around, when I told her that she immediately jumped off her bed lightly. I wonder just where exactly that

earlier bored appearance of hers went off to. The lady that I had seen earlier must have just been an illusion. She's a girl that has to move, why did I allow myself to get fooled.

And so Claudia briskly left her room, looked right, looked left, then looked right again. What is she doing. It's not like traffic's going to come down this hallway and hit her.

"Erina-dono…… Where's the domain lord's office?"

……It seems that even in this small mansion, and what's more, in spite of running around every day, it seems that she still doesn't know where the domain lord's office is. Now I'm feeling a little worried about letting this person be my bodyguard. She's so foolish, there's too much to even sigh at. When I think that after sending Kamil away to construct the village that I'll be accompanied by Claudia every day, I felt an indescribable feeling at what I was going to put myself through.

Even Claudia seemed to be a little embarrassed at least, her face was unmistakably turning slightly red. My indescribable feeling doubled in strength.

"My name's not Erina, it's Eliza. I'll take you to the office."

"No, you only have to tell me where it is. Eliza-dono, please rest for a bit in my bed."

"Eh?"

"Your complexion looks terrible. Letting such a child do as she likes when she's in such a bad condition, is against my code of chivalry. Now, go and rest. When I return, I'll take you to your room."

Claudia smiled widely as she said so and pushed me into her room, and she half closed the door on me, and gallantly went on her way towards the left hallway.

She said and did something cool, but Earl Terejia's office is actually on the hallway to the right. What a no-good girl……

This time, I deeply sighed, resigning myself to the fact that there's probably nothing I can do about her.

At the same time, I laughed a little. Mysteriously, my headache seems to be better than it was as well, that's probably thanks to that no-good girl as well.

As Claudia insisted, I threw myself onto her bed. Even though I had been feeling so terrible all morning, my consciousness easily retreated from me and I fell asleep.

Chapter 27
In bad condition

Knock knock, a sound came from the wooden door.

“It’s Kamil.”

At hearing his muffled voice after the knocks, I felt a sick feeling in my stomach. My throat felt painful as if it had just been burned, and I couldn’t muster up a voice to reply. As he opened the door silently as to not make any sound, I reflexively closed my eyes and wrapped myself in my blanket.

After falling asleep in Claudia’s bed, because of my bad condition I had been brought back to my room. I might have strained myself too much and tired myself out. Because I felt sick, I haven’t had anything to eat, and I’ve been sleeping all day.

While Kamil checked to see how I was doing, he slowly approached me. It felt as if my heart was being gripped tightly and suffocating. Even though it wasn’t cold now, with every step that Kamil took, I could feel myself trembling.

“……Charlie?”

Despite my brain ordering my body to pretend to be calm and answer him, my body had stiffened up and I couldn’t even breathe. I could hear my heart beating annoyingly loudly in my ears.

Maybe he’ll think I’m asleep, Kamil touched my cheek with his fingers. Goosebumps ran down my body, and my body flinched without my permission.

“Charlie?”

I desperately kept my eyes closed. I don’t know what kind of expression Kamil is making, but I’m terribly afraid of seeing him. He might even be holding a knife in his other hand right now. There’s no way he’s trying to kill me right now, if he had known about it he would have done something to me the moment he met me, is what my logic was telling me, but even so I couldn’t stop my body from shaking.

Without a doubt, I was afraid of Kamil.

Kamil stroked my cheek with his fingers again. Tension and fear seem to have frozen my body solid, this time I didn't react.

I could hear the sounds of Kamil's slow breathing. Even though he wasn't moving, that alone caused my heart rate to go up. However, even the blood coursing through my body felt like it was freezing over.

"……It's been decided that I'll be heading east to take charge of constructing the village."

Although he was talking, it sounded more like a monotone. He muttered it in a rather low voice.

"The earl-sama said that he can't leave this job up to someone he doesn't trust."

Kamil's fingers that were touching my cheek moved to my forehead. He casually brushed aside my bangs, and traced his fingers across my forehead. I could hear him laughing slightly bitterly.

"In a difficult time, you shouldn't be making that kind of face. Eliza-sama's so stubborn……"

Kamil's fingers departed from my face together with his voice. Eliza-sama, at hearing him call me that I opened my eyes, but I only saw his back as he was leaving. My throat remained frozen until he left.

My heart is now pounding hard for a different reason than earlier.

How long has it been. His voice, calling me Eliza-sama like that, I feel like I've heard him call me that before. Although he should have called me that recently, I can't seem to remember when. I felt a mix of many emotions, but for sure his voice had been reproachful.

Without knowing why, tears starting flowing out, and were dripping down my face from the corners of my eyes. The back of my throat hurt badly.

It took three more days before I was finally able to get out of bed.

My body strength had dropped since I hadn't been maintaining my body, and the maids prepared simple showers for me with hot water and washbasins. I didn't even have the strength to visit the showers in the barracks.

I used a wrung cloth to wipe my body with, and looked at Rashiok who was waiting beside me although he hadn't come to visit me very much while I had been bedridden. I wiped his forehead as if I were spoiling him, and he laid down for me without me saying anything. Since Rashiok is heavier than a warhorse now, having a six year old ride on him was nothing.

I stopped the maids who were hurriedly getting up. While Rashiok was still laying down and I was by his belly, he scooped me up with his wings.

"I won't say that you're spoiled, but think about our difference in size."

While talking to him and petting his neck, Rashiok made a "guruguru" sound from his throat. His voice seemed more reserved than usual, and I tilted my head in puzzlement.

"Phoebe, what's wrong with Rashiok?"

"Um…… What's wrong, you say?"

I asked the maid who was watching my exchange with Rashiok, but she looked confused and didn't understand my question. I replied to her in exasperation.

"He doesn't seem that energetic."

Normally, Rashiok doesn't act that spoiled when others are around us. And what's more, this time he scooped me up with too much force, this is the first time for him.

"Could it be…… because Kamil isn't here currently? Ojou-sama was also bedridden for a period of time. Rashiok was staying in front of your room the whole time, I think he could be lonely."

"……Kamil, eh. I see, got it."

I accepted the maid's explanation, and slowly closed my eyes. After I received Rashiok from the earl, it's always been Kamil and I that have taken care of him. Rashiok seemed to understand human power relations to some extent, and obeyed me more than Kamil. Since this is the first time that both of us have been absent at the same time, it can't be helped that Rashiok would feel lonely.

Kamil's not going to be here at the mansion anymore. Rashiok made a lonely sounding cry.

Even though I was the one who drove Kamil out, why is it that inside my chest it's hurting. But, at the same time I definitely felt relieved. The contradiction in my own feelings felt so mysterious and sad.

"You're going to move that child to the barracks?"

"Yes. I'm going to send everyone that's connected to that child to the new village being constructed. I told Gunther that together with Claudia, those two are going to be your future bodyguards and that they'll be in his care."

After I dressed myself properly, the first thing I did was to visit Earl Terejia. Even though there's so much work to be done, because I had collapsed so suddenly I haven't been able to do anything. I also wanted to know what went on during the four days that I was bedridden.

The first thing I heard was the report that "Elise" would be moved to the barracks. Indeed, right now we're also moving out the soldiers to help with the first stages of building the new village. This is probably a great chance to hide the short-haired "Elise" out of sight as well as getting him some basic training.

However, some among the army were probably present at the time when "Elise" had been captured from the village. I wondered how we would deceive them, but the earl simply shrugged.

"He's been kept here at the mansion for quite a while. It'll be difficult for anyone to tell that he's the same person as that malnourished, skinny, grubby child."

"……I see, indeed."

His messy unkempt hair had been cut for him, and Kamil had nominally carried out his execution. Attaching his hair to the jute bag that was tossed into the river to give the impression that he was executed, none of the soldiers from that incident at Cyril village would be looking for that child.

His appearance has improved since his diet's gotten more nutritious, and since a maid has been washing him every day, even his skin color is different due to all the dirt that had been piled on his skin. Indeed, the change in him is to the extent that he's like an entire different person.

"I explained to him that he's going to receive military training as well, so he should put his spirit into it and work hard."

Earl Terejia said it nicely, but judging by the expression on his face, it's much more probable that rather than putting his spirit into things, it had only gotten him angry as he would resent the earl for how prideful he was.

Because of what happened to his mother, to that child, as the former domain lord's daughter, if he didn't view me the same way as my father who had used his money for personal luxury and to exploit the people, then he wouldn't be able to maintain his spirit anymore. That's why obediently going through the same training I did, and changing his opinion of me is harder than even dying to him.

If he can maintain his murderous hatred for me and return after going through training then that's fine, or if he fails to make it through the training but changes his view of me then that's fine as well.

"It'll probably correct his distorted views on nobles for him."

As Earl Terejia nodded, once again I started thinking about what that would mean.

I first understood it myself when I went to the royal capital, but the only nobles that my domain's soldiers had ever known were my family, who were all rather extreme and crazy people. The soldiers themselves might not be aware of it, but they view me, Earl Terejia, and Claudia differently now from other nobles. They still basically have a hatred for nobility.

……Well, it might turn out to be good for that child. Being around other people that compare me and Earl Terejia favorably to the other "normal" nobles that they know, it might become easier to change that child's beliefs.

Chapter 28
Magical beasts

Kamil has left the mansion, and so has that child who was secretly staying in the innermost part of the mansion, but daily life here at the mansion didn't change all that much. Under Earl Terejia's instructions, I would help him and Bellway with their work, and listen to Claudia tell stories about her time with the soldiers, and I would carefully manipulate Claudia so that I could control the army, my days became even busier than before.

And so spring has ended and summer has begun, and phosphorescent moths known as rinkas have become active.

"Hm…… Is that a type of monster?"

"That's right. This year, we've received reports of increased monster activity in the Monster Forest from the Jugfena royal domain. ……Also, it's not just the magical beasts in the Monster Forest. We must also be careful of the monsters from the Amon Nor Mountains."

"Ahh……"

As Earl Terejia informed me about the reports on monster activity, I could only listen incredulously.

Monsters really do exist in this world.

Since I hadn't heard much about them, I doubted whether they really existed, but it does seem that once in a while monsters would attack people or their livestock. It's always been a topic quite distant from me, but come to think of it, Rashiok's species, the draconis, is also a type of magical beast.

I don't know the exact definition of a magical beast. Nor do I really know the specific differences between insects, animals, humans, and monsters in this world. In the bedtime stories that I'd heard from Mrs. Galton before, magical beasts are considered to be monsters that can use magic, but I've never heard of anything like magic or

magical beasts in real life here. In fact, I've never even seen Rashiok using any mysterious powers like being able to breathe fire or control the wind.

However, until I met Rashiok, I'd always thought that draconis were fictional, and I suppose that until this spring, I'd always been a hermit cooped up in my mansion that's never gone anywhere before. Just like magical beasts, magic might really exist as well.

"Come to think of it, I haven't really heard much in detail about the Monster Forest before."

Earl Terejia raised his eyebrow as he looked at me.

"Yes, really. I've always thought it was only a name."

"Didn't Mrs. Galton tell you bedtime stories about monsters and magic every night?"

Earl Terejia seemed to be puzzled as he asked me, but I tilted my head in return. Were bedtime stories really to be believed?

"Yes, I heard them, but I thought they were all made up."

After all, in Mrs. Galton's stories, there were people like sages and paladins, and various paranormal phenomenon that could only be explained by magic. Since as far as I knew, they didn't actually exist, I thought it was fiction. After all, I didn't believe in monsters.

What's more, the new nanny, Mrs. Hortensia, doesn't even tell bedtime stories like Mrs. Galton did. Since I'm still using the common sense from my previous world, it can't be helped that I didn't believe in anything until now.

"I see."

Earl Terejia nodded and made a complicated expression.

"Call Mrs. Marshan over here immediately."

Mrs. Marshan who was brought to the lord's office by Bellway, had some kind of box under her arm.

“I heard that you wanted to see me.”

I’ve been so busy lately, that I’ve had less time for Mrs. Marshan’s lectures recently. I didn’t really think anything of it since Earl Terejia had allowed it, but it’s been almost half a month since I last saw Mrs. Marshan, I’ve been feeling too lazy to study as of late for some reason. I wonder if it’s because I remembered just how much I had to study in my previous life.

“Mrs. Marshan, please give Eliza-sama a lecture on magical beasts immediately.”

“I understand. Should I take that to mean that it’s alright to begin right now?”

“Of course.”

Bellway must have already filled her in on the details, after a simple confirmation with the earl, Mrs. Marshan took me back to my room immediately.

But anyways, I wondered just how important magical beasts and the Monster Forest were. For the time being, it still didn’t seem very real to me yet, so I didn’t know how much importance I should give to magical beasts. The children of other domain lords probably already recognize them as real, as I kept thinking irrelevant things, we finally arrived back at my room. Rashiok who was curled up in a corner of my room raised his head as if to say, what’s going on?

“Mrs. Marshan, what’s in that box?”

“It’s a book, Eliza-sama.”

The box was about the size of my jewelry box in the closet, so it seems to be the type of book with its own box case. Looking at the book and its leather bindings after it was removed from its case, it reminded me of a dictionary, and since there’s no printing technology in Arxia, such a book must be really expensive.

“All domain lords for domains where there’s a possibility of monsters attacking are required to have a copy of this book, but taking into consideration Eliza-sama’s age, I have been taking care of this book until now.”

I nodded, as Mrs. Marshan immediately opened the book and handed it to me.

“First, I’ll have to teach you about monsters. Monsters are creatures that have powers to cause mysterious phenomenon, which we call magic. Among them, we tend to call the ones that tend to attack people and livestock magical beasts. That’s because most of them resemble beasts.”

“I understand that a draconis would be considered a type of monster, but it wouldn’t be a magical beast?”

I glanced at Rashiok who was lying quietly in the corner of my room as I asked my question, and Mrs. Marshan shook her head.

“You already know that draconis mostly eat snow snakes, and since they have high intelligence and are relatively mild-mannered, they hardly ever attack humans. The only magic they can use is said to be magic that helps them fly.”

I see, I nodded again, and Mrs. Marshan went hmm…… and tilted her head to the side as she was thinking.

“……Eliza-sama, have you seen a rinka before?”

At Mrs. Marshan’s question, I couldn’t help but think of small moths that would glow in the dark like fireflies, as I told her I hadn’t. The way that fireflies would leave a trail of light behind them was quite a beautiful scene to behold.

“Rinkas are full-fledged magical beasts. They usually gather by the hundreds and burn down trees with fire magic, and even though they’re a type of moth they’re immune to fire.”

Ehh…… a comment involuntarily escaped my lips. That sounds quite dangerous.

“The buildings in the royal capital all have an outer layer of rinka scales. After all, they won’t burn so it’s the best defense against fire. Anyways, they’re not considered that dangerous by themselves, but only in large packs.”

I kept nodding. Mrs. Marshan continued with her explanation.

With Mrs. Marshan teaching me as well as using the records from the book, I learned about monsters, and when this crash course ended it was already time for dinner. Since the maids had brought us tea and snacks during the lesson, we had basically spent the entire day on this.

For now, I'll just sum up what I learned today.

Each type of monster can use different types of magic.

The Monster Forest is so named because only monsters live there with few exceptions. But, monsters actually live almost everywhere.

Monsters have active periods, in which suddenly all of their kind will become active. There are reports that monsters with lower intelligence will behave incomprehensibly.

Although there was also various other things that I learned, those seem to be the most important points. In the domain lord's book on monsters, it mentioned that in case of monster attacks, of course the domain lord and the domain's army would be responsible for defending the land.

Even though it's such a busy time, for monsters to be attacking, this is such an unwelcome event.

Chapter 29
Defending against fire moths

I used four days to learn as much about monsters and countermeasures against them as I could, cramming it in, and Earl Terejia posted notices within the domain about countermeasures to put into practice against the fire moths.

Due to the report that it's now their active period, once it becomes autumn, with the dry season, the fire moths will become even more of a fire hazard. This summer, their numbers are about average, but last winter an unusual thing had occurred. Usually the fire moths disappear during the winter, but it seems that last winter they remained active and still attacked people's villages.

"Mrs. Marshan, there's no mistake that salt water is the most effective thing at exterminating the fire moths?"

"Indeed."

"I would like to see this for myself. Please tell Bellway that I would like to have three fire moths captured for me."

Fire moths, just like regular moths and butterflies, have scales that repel water. And what's more, fire moths seem to be quite water resistant, so only using water would be useless.

However, fire moths seem to be quite weak against salt. I don't understand the exact reason, but I vaguely remember learning in science class during my previous life something about certain insects being weak to salt.

Upon receiving my request, Mrs. Marshan left the room immediately. Normally, I'd be requesting Kamil, but he's not here right now, and for now, even outside of lessons, Mrs. Marshan has taken over his duties. And what's more, she would always follow me everywhere. It was necessary for a domain lord to always have someone by them to carry out their orders, is what Mrs. Marshan was teaching me, and I'm very grateful that Mrs. Marshan is more open-minded and accepting of different ways of thinking.

"Salt, eh……"

To think it would be salt. In Arxia, salt is the cheapest among all seasonings, although it's still fairly expensive among daily necessities. I intend to see if I can find something to substitute for it. For now, I'll just think on countermeasures against the fire moths with salt water as the main weapon.

Then, since we know that salt water can defeat the fire moths, we can have salt prepared to help defend the villages.

It isn't that rare for fire moths to cause fires, but since the trees native to here usually have high moisture content, the main thing to be concerned about are each village's stockpiles of dried firewood.

As for the forests in my domain, rather than using the soldiers on duty at the area under direct control, I'd prefer if it would be possible for the citizens in my domain to guard them instead. Right now, I'd prefer to avoid adding to the citizens' sense of fear by sending soldiers.

Fire moths are mainly active during the daytime. Even if it's their active period, it's highly unlikely for fire moths to be flying about at night. In my domain, since the moon is usually hidden by the Amon Nor Mountains, it's quite dark at night. It seems that fire moths don't have night vision, so they can't fly around without any moonlight.

However, since the villagers don't have lights, night comes early for them. They end their day and go to sleep when the sun goes down. It'll be necessary to organize patrols around the villages each day until it becomes completely dark at midnight, and find volunteers for that.

……Organizing the villagers to protect their own villages, it feels almost like a vigilante corps. In this case, it might be for the best if I seriously try and establish a vigilante patrol.

There's also the situation with the neighboring country to the east, taking into consideration that Kaldia might be invaded by enemies, this might be a good chance to teach the people some basics of self-defense now. I'd like to make an organization with the villagers that would improve our cooperation and communication.

I finished a basic plan for setting up a vigilante group system, and left my room for the lord's office. When I knocked and entered, Earl Terejia who was working busily just like usual looked at me with a surprised face.

"……It couldn't be, but are you already done with your work?"

"No, I apologize. I'm here to see you because I would like to discuss the domain's military regulations and information on the soldiers."

The domain's military regulations, at hearing this the earl raised his eyebrow. I told him about my plan for setting up a vigilante organization, as he listened with a dubious look on his face, and he pulled some pieces of wood out of his drawer for some reason.

"What's that?"

"It's a rough draft for a self-defense organization. I never would have expected that you could come up with something like this yourself as well."

The earl seemed a little apologetic, and I nodded. This was the first time that I had come up with a plan for the domain entirely on my own. Taking into consideration my age and lack of experience, it's no surprise that the earl also prepared something like this.

Earl Terejia's draft had the same idea as my plan, using conscription into the domain's army to establish a new organization. Apart from that, he also had methods for cooperation between the new forces and the domain's army, as well as setting up methods for faster communication in the villages, which I was still thinking about.

"……Then, we'll try to make this a reality."

"Once you're finished with these, bring them over to me. Also, please submit your countermeasures against the fire moths then as well."

Earl Terejia handed me military regulations and military service records, including of those that had already retired from the domain's army, and I left the office just as Bellway arrived with a small cage containing three fire moths.

"Eliza-sama. I was just about to go find you. I've brought three fire moths."

"Ahh, thanks for your trouble. I'm sorry, but please bring that to the garden for me. Also, could you please prepare half a cup of salt water for me, as well as two cups of regular water. Lastly, please call the gardener Boriswaf for me."

“Very well.”

I feel like I’ve crossed a point of no return and done something bad. I turned around to look at Bellway’s back as he was leaving, and I got a feeling like I was getting more efficient at using people. Before, Earl Terejia was the one giving orders to everyone in the mansion, but I’m going to have to get used to this from now as well.

I returned to my room at the same time as Mrs. Marshan, and I looked at her arms which were filled with information documents and sighed. Since this was an urgent matter, I didn’t have to say anything.

I placed the documents on top of my desk, and began drafting my plan against the fire moths. Supplying the salt water, and noting the locations where fire moths have been sighted.

If there’s no other methods that can be as effective as salt water against fire moths, we’ll have to supply the salt water. That’s because the villagers don’t have enough salt of their own. What’s more, we might not have enough salt water to go around for everyone. I wonder if I can use poisonous herbs that won’t be enough to kill a human, and mix them into water and have it be effective on fire moths.

While Bellway came to see me while I was writing, he stopped me when I rose my head and spoke to Mrs. Marshan instead. I see, he’s telling her that he’s done with the preparations I requested.

When I finished writing for the time being, Mrs. Marshan probably noticed it and spoke up at that moment.

“Bellway reported that he’s finished preparing the items in the garden you requested.”

“I understand. Let’s go.”

When Mrs. Marshan and I arrived at the garden, Bellway and the gardener Boriswaf were waiting for us. Under the earl’s instruction, Bellway will be remaining here to watch over what I do here.

I told him directly that I intended to experiment on the fire moths to see what could kill them, and I left the more detailed explanation up to Mrs. Marshan. Boriswaf is here to help me carry out the experiment in my place. That’s because it wouldn’t be

considered appropriate for me or Mrs. Marshan to be pouring salt water on fire moths and killing them.

“First, I’d like to see for myself the fire moth’s reaction to salt water. Boriswaf.”

At my request, Boriswaf let one fire moth out with a practiced hand. I can see the fire moth quite clearly, and it’s at a close distance for my first time as well, this will make for an excellent observation. A fire moth is about as big as a swallowtail butterfly from my previous life, and its wings were a pale vermillion. With the lighting, it almost looks golden. It really looks like the golden light of fireflies at night, I wonder if that has to do with the pale lighting of the moon as well.

Boriswaf held on to its wings, and dripped a little bit of salt water onto them. As a gardener, he would be experienced in getting rid of insects, so as expected he’s good at handling a fire moth.

The salt water changed the wing’s color from pale vermillion to dark brown, and the fire moth was fluttering frantically. It was clear to see that it was in pain. I don’t know the biology of moths and butterflies too well, but even their wings were probably able to feel pain.

“Alright, let it free.”

I wanted to see if the fire moth would be able to fly with damaged wings, so I ordered Boriswaf to let it go. Although the fire moth was set free, and kept trying to flap its wings, it seems that it wasn’t able to fly.

When I look closer, there are tiny holes in the wings. It’s because of the salt water.

“Butterflies and moths won’t be able to fly if even small holes are drilled into their wings.”

I nodded at Boriswaf’s information. This means that I don’t have to completely cover it in salt water, and now I should see if I can find something to replace salt water, or be even be more efficient.

Chapter 30
First time training with Instructor Claudia

Earl Terejia has approved of my plan to deal with the fire moths. Wooden pipes containing salt water would be issued, and a civil militia would be set up.

Since there wasn't enough salt water for everyone, we also distributed wooden pipes with poisons that would work on the fire moths. We also made sure to add sand into the salt water to make sure that the villagers wouldn't try and use the salt water for their personal use. There was also the fact that we discovered fine grains would solidify the moth scales during the experiment in the garden. However, we weren't able to find something that would replicate the effect of salt dissolving the wings and causing holes in them.

Since there were more fire moths than could be taken care of by people, I used the idea of pesticides from my previous life, and instructed the villagers to spray salt water around the fields and near the entrances to the forests, so that the fire moths wouldn't go near the crops. I also made sure to inform the villagers not to spray salt water on the crops themselves, as that would ruin them. Although I don't remember the details, I do seem to vaguely remember that spraying salt on fields isn't good for the crops.

"I've received my first task from the earl! Starting today, you're going to be learning the spear from me, Elida-dono!"

"It's Eliza, Claudia-dono."

I had just finished the plans on dealing with the fire moths, and was working on documents regarding transporting the necessary goods to the villages, when I was ambushed by Claudia, and I was forced to stop working. Well, these documents have to be completed by the day after tomorrow, even though this is something that the earl asked me to do, I don't absolutely have to finish them today. After all, refusals never get through to Claudia. Since it's useless, I've learned not to waste my energy struggling.

“Ahh, my apologies. Then, Eliza-dono, let’s go to the training grounds!”

Claudia grabbed my wrist, and started dragging me around while humming.

“The training grounds? For the soldiers?”

“Yep.”

“I have a different training ground from the soldiers. Since there’s a wide empty space behind the house, I use that.”

Normally Claudia would forcibly use the soldiers’ training grounds and play there, but I don’t go there. After my three months of training concluded, I haven’t been back to the barracks or their training grounds. That’s because I’ve had to either show up in front of the citizens of my domain, or accompany nobles lately. With my own soldiers’ negative feelings towards me, I had to placate them, and get them used to me. I should have cultivated my relationship with the soldiers more, but after leaving the barracks, but considering my position, I haven’t been able to go back to the barracks.

“……I see. I wanted to show you the growth of that child entrusted to me.”

Even Claudia knew at least some common sense as a noble, and she nodded meekly. She doesn’t completely lack common sense, now I know she’s not completely unmanageable. As a house guest that’s entering my domain’s army, we’ve allowed her to freely go in and out of the barracks and use the training grounds there as she liked.

“Ratoka, eh.”

“Yes, Gunther said he’s finally beginning the food gathering for himself this afternoon.”

At the same time that Claudia joined the army, Ratoka was placed as a soldier in training at the barracks, and he’s now going through the exact same basic training that I did. That is, getting beaten up all morning by Gunther, polishing tools and cleaning with the other soldiers in training until noon, and doing an endless amount of marching training after lunch. After that, he would have to forage for his own dinner by himself.

“I’ve never hunted before until I came here, but it’s really so fun! The food I catch myself tastes amazingly delicious.”

Claudia seems to be getting excited over some memories about hunting. I felt a sense of danger, so I gently tried to pry Claudia's hand off my wrist. She didn't budge.

"When I first went up against large beasts with my spear, I realized for the first time that this was indeed different from practice! In order to outmaneuver and defeat enemies with hostile intentions, I must train my intuition!!"

As she shouted and rose her fist to the sky in a display of her determination, Claudia seemed to be sparkling. Probably without realizing it, her other hand was also raising mine to the sky and she was using all her strength to grip me with.

It hurts. Someone, please save me.

"Since that's been decided, Eliza-dono, let's immediately go do some special training behind the mansion!"

I don't know if it's in answer to my wish, but Rashiok who was taking a walk nearby, approached Claudia and gently nudged her back with his front foot.

"Noo, it's an enemy attack!!"

She performed a splendid high roundhouse kick, and I could even hear the sound it made in the air. Although Rashiok was able to duck it, if it had been anyone else from the mansion they probably would have taken a direct hit. Well, since nobody was behind Rashiok, luckily that kick didn't blow anyone's head away.

"……Oh, Rashiok! I'm so sorry!!"

Claudia hurriedly began apologizing to Rashiok, and was breathing hard, and Rashiok met my eyes as if to say, really? This took Claudia about five minutes or so.

Finally, with Rashiok coming along as well, the spear training behind the mansion began.

Claudia had regained her composure on our way here, and with a very calm expression, she began teaching me the advantages and features of the spear.

“Although the sword is basically the main weapon for nobles, in actual battles nobles use spears more often. Do you know why?”

“Since the sword is required for ceremonies and rituals, nobles are taught ceremonial swordsmanship. However, in actual battles, the spear has longer reach, and being a two-handed weapon, the spear is more advantageous than the sword.”

“Yep, that’s it. Now that chain mail is the main type of armor, swords are rather useless. You have to pierce through it. For that, the spear is more suited to the task due to its shape. Of course, the difference in reach is critical in actual combat as well. When attacking from horseback, swords can be blocked even by helmets.”

I felt strange at seeing Claudia actually being serious, and nodded. It seems that there’s going to be a very high possibility of me actually being in battle in the future. Since I’ll be riding, I want longer reach.

“First, you’ll have to remember the feeling of manipulating a rod-shaped weapon. Gunther’s spear practice probably only focused on thrusting the spear.”

For infantry with no knowledge of martial arts, they would only receive training on standing in formation and thrusting the spears for basic training. However, since I’m a commander, Claudia said that I need to truly master the spear and be able to use it for self-defense.

I nodded at Claudia again. Since this has to do with improving my odds of survival, I’m going to take this seriously and learn the best I can.

“Then, start with your form.”

“Yes!”

Although I gave a spirited reply, three hours later I was regretting it slightly.

When Claudia said to start with my form, she didn’t mean to start with the basic training that Gunther had me do before. The proper form was completely different from what I had been doing up until now, and that one word before training started was the only word I was able to get in, I was almost mentally exhausted to the point of being unable to speak.

With three hours of practice swinging, my training concluded for today.

……I had been slightly excited to learn martial arts seriously for the first time today, but my inner child was fully exhausted, crushed, and thrown away somewhere.

End of Act 1, Part 2

【 PART III 】

Chapter 31
A day in midsummer

People were strung up on wooden stakes as the smoke rose around them, and I could only watch without diverting my eyes. Under the harsh summer sun, with the burning straw beneath them, the people that were in the process of dying could do nothing but scream and scream.

There were other people that were truly enjoying the sight of the last moments of those thrashing about terribly on the wooden stakes. They would sometimes add oil to the fire or douse it with water, seeming to want to prolong the suffering of the victims.

The screams would slow down and gradually stop as what used to be human turned black on the stakes. Before I realized it, there was a horrible stench drifting around me.

At the same time that the heat and stench caused me to vomit reflexively, I heard the sound of raucous laughter next to me. It sounded so out of place at this type of location, that I couldn't get it out of my head and it agitated me greatly.

I couldn't take any more of this, and all I wanted to do was crouch up into a ball and close my eyes and cover my ears, but because I was being held in someone's arms, I couldn't do so.

Let me go, I desperately tried to say that but I wasn't able to talk yet, and the adult arm was easily able to hold on to my baby body.

Everything's a blur. I feel like my head will break with how much it hurts.

The summer heat, the hot air from the fire, the stench, they combined to choke me. My nausea was at the limit of what I could bear, and something traveled up my esophagus as I reflexively vomited. The smell of my own vomit mixed with the stench of burnt flesh and made things smell even worse.

After staring at my own puddle of vomit in a daze for a bit, I slowly raised my head. I wanted to take a look at the person that was holding me. It was almost something

instinctive, I'm not sure myself why I wanted to do so. But, after I looked at him, I regretted it from the bottom of my heart.

He had beautiful long black hair, with eyes the color of blood, and he was smiling with an ecstatic expression as he looked back into my eyes.

I realized that he was my own father, and I woke up from my nightmare in my own bed.

In the stifling hot atmosphere of my room, I hurriedly wiped off the sweat dripping down my cheeks. Perhaps it was because of the nightmare though, my hands were cold, and I was shaking badly.

Without even opening my curtains, I left my room. I wanted cool, refreshing air, but even outside it was hot. I'm fed up with this suffocating heat and humidity. I opened the window, and at least some fresh air came blowing in.

It's currently the hottest summer that I've experienced in the Kaldia domain.

There's been an increasing number of people getting heat stroke in the western part of my domain, we've been too busy dealing with that to set up the civil militia yet. Earl Terejia and I have been confined to our rooms dealing with how much work there is, but the servants forced us to get plenty of water and take breaks as well.

The soldiers have begun returning from the eastern village construction project. The refugees have begun moving there in groups of twenty. Since there's more water in the east, the climate there is milder and I heard from some of the soldiers that they wished they were still there.

Kamil's still not back at the mansion yet, it'll be at least two months before things finish and he returns.

I took off my nightclothes that were soaked in sweat, and put on a light tunic and dalmatic. Mrs. Hortensia should probably be helping with breakfast preparations, and she won't be coming to wake me up. After I turned five, I didn't need anyone coming to wake me up anymore unless I overslept.

My neck felt sticky with sweat and uncomfortable, and I looked for a maid on my way to the dining hall. Since Phoebe and Isadora are the only maids here, it's hard to find them during the morning when it's so busy. I got lucky today though, I found Isadora just as she was taking the laundry back into the mansion.

"Good morning, ojou-sama."

"Good day, Isadora. Sorry, but please clean my bedroom today as well."

Those nightclothes have to be washed before I'd wear them again, and my sheets were soaked in sweat as well. Getting a nightmare just because of how hot the weather's been, I want to improve the comfort of my bed even if it's only by a little.

Maybe it's the same for everyone else, the heat's getting to them, Isadora just nodded and responded in a low voice.

"I understand. Was there anything else you needed of me?"

"After breakfast, I would like to wipe my body down. Please make the preparations for me."

Isadora nodded again, bowed, then hurriedly walked down the hallway in a busy manner. Getting the laundry is a maid's job, but actually washing it is the maidservant's job. Without even needing to take my time and eat slowly, my room will probably be ready with a wash basin and towel.

For once, Earl Terejia, Mrs. Marshan, and even Claudia were all there at breakfast at the same time. Since Elise always took her meals in her room, that means that other than her, just about everyone else was coincidentally in the dining hall right now.

……Come to think of it, I haven't visited Elise for a while. Recently Elise has been getting better, and she would often be out in the garden during the day, so there's been no need to visit her room.

Let's go see her today.

After I wiped myself with the towel that Isadora prepared for me, I arrived at Elise's room, just when Maya came walking out at a brisk pace.

“Ah, Eliza-sama.”

“Where are you going, Maya? It’s rare to see you not by Elise-dono’s side.”

Since Maya is Elise’s personal maid that she brought along with her, they spend most of their time together. It’s rather unusual to see her going somewhere else by herself especially during the day. Today, rare things keep happening.

“Yes, the earl called for me today.”

“The earl…… I see. I’ll take care of Elise for the time being.”

“Thank you very much. Sorry for the trouble, but please take good care of Elise.”

Maya seemed slightly relieved, and went off briskly again. Since Elise often has coughing attacks, she probably doesn’t want to leave her alone.

And so I knocked on Elise’s door, and heard her saying please come in. Compared to when she first arrived here, it sounded much more energetic.

“Elise-dono, pardon my intrusion.”

“Eliza-sama! Welcome.”

Instead of sitting on her bed like usual, Elise was sitting on a chair against the window. Her face was beaming and she was about to stand up, but I motioned her to stop, saying it was fine.

“You seem to be doing well today.”

“……Yes, thanks to this place I’ve become very healthy.”

She was smiling and nodding happily, and I approached her to see what she was up to. I stood next to Elise and suddenly felt slightly shy, as she was looking outside, I spoke up in a quiet voice.

“Outside?”

“Yes. From here, I can see the garden, as well as the pond on the other side.”

Looking at the scenery from here, she seemed instilled with energy, and she laughed. Ahh, I made a casual reply, and looked outside as well, and saw the garden and pond that Elise was talking about. It's the place where I got the poisonous hemlock. Since the pond isn't a place that the gardener's required to take care of, there might even still be some there still. Although, when the soldiers were connecting the pond to the water tank for the barracks' bath, they probably should have gotten rid of any poisonous plants already.

Various types of colorful vegetation surrounded the water, looking at it from a distance made it seem quite pretty. In a well-shaded location, I squinted and saw a tiny grave. So one could also see that grave from here, eh.

"……You shouldn't be going to the pond."

"Of course, I know very well. Until I get healthier and more energetic, I won't go out from the garden."

I warned Elise as a reminder that the pond was dangerous, but I still saw a longing for the water in her eyes.

Chapter 32
Order to dispatch troops

The days passed by as reports came in about the fire moth extermination and how the eastern village construction was progressing. The other day, thirty warhorses from the Ruktoferd domain were delivered to us, so Earl Terejia's establishment of a cavalry troop has become one step closer to realization, and other than that, not much has happened.

Then, a messenger from the Jugfena royal domain's army arrived at the Kaldia domain.

The earl and I welcomed him in the mansion's drawing room. The soldier was completely covered from head to toe in chain mail, with a tunic embroidered with the Arxia Kingdom's coat of arms, a crown and the Sacred Code, covering his armor. I pulled on the earl's sleeve carefully so as to not dirty it, and got "he's a knight" as a response in return.

I see, so he's a knight. It's okay to use knights as messengers.

Knights are what we call nobles that have become military officers. To be more precise, knights are those that have officially entered the knights, and commoners that enter the knights can become titled knights as well. Since nobles without titles can become titled knights as well, entering the knighthood is basically a way to earn nobility.

"Welcome to the Kaldia domain."

"I'm greatly obliged for your welcome. I bring a message from the leader of the Jugfena Fortress Knights, Earl Einsbark."

The knight entered without even sitting down, and remained standing between the chair and the desk. It's some urgent business. Since he was still standing, the earl and I remained standing as well.

The knight looked at the earl's expression of anticipation, and solemnly began speaking.

“About ten women and children from the Shiru tribe have arrived at Fort Jugfena. They’re currently under our protection.”

……At the knight’s words, I gently closed my eyes. The time has finally come, eh. It’s been two months since we decided to accept the refugees, the Shiru tribe has done well to escape from the Densel army.

“According to one of them, there’s still forty more of the Shiru tribe that will arrive. They’re being pursued by a company of three hundred Densel soldiers. The Kaldia domain has agreed to take in the refugees, so will there be any problems in accepting them?”

“There are none.”

When I answered, the knight looked at me in surprise. Mmm, although he glanced at Earl Terejia, the earl nodded and he nodded back before looking me in the eye. He’s a praiseworthy knight. Even when others know that I’m Viscountess Kaldia, they always treat Earl Terejia as the domain lord instead.

“Very well then. Together with the one thousand refugees currently under protection at the fort, it shall be fine to send them here as promised?”

“Yes, of course.”

The knight nodded at me, then he hesitated a little.

“……Viscountess Kaldia, Earl Einsbark would like to request for your aid in defending Fort Jugfena.”

I could see that he was troubled and perplexed in his eyes, and he was looking at me with a changed expression. He seemed to be feeling a sense of guilt, it’s very easy to see that he probably doesn’t want to involve children in battle.

He’s honest about his feelings. And, he’s very ethical.

I remembered that when Earl Terejia first taught me about the neighboring country, he had avoided looking me in the eyes.

“I shall accept this request. I’ll take fifty soldiers from the Kaldia army and travel to Fort Jugfena.”

"……You will personally?"

It felt like he couldn't help himself when he asked that question. Oops, said the expression on the knight's face, as he looked at me with wonder and good will.

His values seem similar to what I remember from my previous life. In this world, it was very ordinary for there to be child soldiers younger than ten, and it wasn't all that rare for domain lords that were just past five years old to be in battle. I felt a strange sense of nostalgia as I firmly nodded in response to him.

"……I understand. I'll inform Earl Einsbark. I shall excuse myself and take my leave now."

The next morning, a messenger pigeon arrived from the royal capital.

The message it brought was an order to dispatch troops from the Upper House of Lords. The Upper House of Lords is also commonly referred to as the "Imperial Court," it's where representatives of the king and the House of Lords make various decisions. It's similar to feudal governments that I learned about in my previous life, and it consists of the king, prime minister, commander-in-chief, high priest, archpriest, three judges, and five representatives from the House of Lords.

"Viscountess Kaldia shall command her domain's army and join the defense of Fort Jugfena…… Even the royal palace went to the trouble of drafting such an order."

There's no doubt that this has to do with Earl Terejia's actions and our acceptance of the refugees. Receiving a direct order from the Upper House of Lords, even three times in a lifetime is considered to be very rare. On top of that, it was also sealed with a royal decree from the king.

I think a simple order from the regular House of Lords should have been sufficient, it feels that even the people in higher places are giving the Kaldia domain their recognition. As I looked at the order documents, I sat down reflexively.

"How long are you going to rest and relax there when you shouldn't have the free time to be slacking off, Aida-dono!"

"It's Eliza, Claudia-dono."

“Mmm, my apologies. Well then, it’s time for you to issue a command for the army to move out already! Come on, hurry up.”

As I looked at the person in front of me, Claudia seemed to be overly excited and wasn’t even trying to hide it. This girl……

“There’s something I would like to talk about with you before that.”

“Hm?”

I sighed as I began talking to Claudia. She tilted her head, and smiled with what passed for her serious expression. I already understand well after associating with her for several months that she’s always serious in her own way.

But even so, this is a very serious topic, so I put on a serious expression as well.

“I believe Earl Terejia should have already asked you to become my bodyguard in place of Kamil.”

“Mm! …… Hm……?”

……I wonder if me trying to have a serious discussion with her meant that I’m an idiot? Am I in the wrong? At Claudia’s confused response, I suddenly felt a sense of futility within me. Maybe I made a mistake from the very moment I decided to have her become my bodyguard.

“…… …… …… Oh, oh! Come to think of it, he did tell me something like that.”

Claudia struck her hand with her fist as she remembered, and I swallowed down my imminent sigh. It seems that she had completely forgotten about it up until now. It’s just that for once, she was able to read the atmosphere and went along with what I said.

“Unfortunately, Kamil is currently unable to return from overseeing the village construction. There’s nobody else that can speak the language of the new incoming settlers, so there’s no one else that can take charge of the construction project.”

“Ahh, I see how everything is.”

Mmm, mmm, Claudia kept nodding and responding vaguely, but I wonder just how much of what I said she took in……

“Meaning, it’s not possible for Kamil to return and be my bodyguard, so if it’s possible, since I have to go to Fort Jugfena now, I would like to request Claudia-dono to become my bodyguard. Is that alright?”

“Of course, no problem.”

She answered immediately with a delighted smile. I see, it’s no problem, then that’s good.

“Then, until I return from the fort, I’ll be leaving you in charge of things here at the mansion.”

Claudia didn’t seem to have noticed the way I had worded my request, and say that she’d protect me during battle as well. I’m really glad that she didn’t say something like that. Claudia’s been entrusted to the Kaldia domain. If she happened to die or get injured in battle, it would become a major incident.

“……What!? Won’t I be unable to protect you during the battle then!!”

“It’ll be less dangerous here at the Kaldia domain, and of course I can’t have Claudia-dono accompany me to the front lines of battle at the fort.”

“No~! I’m going to go along with you to protect you!”

Wah, I hurriedly retracted my earlier statement on leaving her behind and made my escape, running for the domain lord’s office. I have to make a report to the earl on what just happened.

Chapter 33
Along the way, Part 1

Since Earl Terejia's private army was assigned to the defense of the mansion, I had to summon thirty soldiers back from the village construction and take another twenty soldiers that still remained here. With this, I'll have the fifty soldiers I promised to that knight.

Together with Gunther's orders, the soldiers marched in tandem with me overlooking them while riding my horse. Since soldiers-in-training will be leading the reins for me, compared to my birthday celebration, it's a lot easier.

"I thought you weren't able to ride a horse……"

Claudia who was walking next to me muttered that under her breath. Since she had helped me ride part way on our return trip from the royal capital, she's gotten the impression that I'm unable to ride by myself.

"It's not that I can't ride, I just didn't have the strength to control a horse for that long."

"How weak. When we return, I'm going to instill some intensive training for physical fitness into you."

I staggered a little at Claudia's grandiose exaggeration and touched my temple as I felt a slight headache coming on. It's not that I'm all that weak, I just have the strength of a six year old still.

I went on without bothering to reply, and on my other side, Gunther arrived next to me. Claudia called out his name in such a bright voice.

"Gunther!"

"Yo, ojou-chan, and 'my lord.' The march is going well."

Agil was the one in charge of the overall marching, while Gunther commanded from the front. It seems that the longest serving soldiers have become a bit revved up, I nodded slightly at him, then tilted my head.

"……Um, what's with calling me my lord?"

"Ah? You don't think it's fitting?"

Of course it wouldn't be fitting when you suddenly change the way you address me. For the person who's always called me "brat" up until now to suddenly address me as "my lord," of course I'm going to have a hard time adjusting to it.

When I was living in the barracks with the other soldiers, at first they were calling me brat just like Gunther, but after they got used to me they were calling me Charlie for some reason, the same as Kamil. Gunther had stubbornly never changed his way of calling me, so that's why I'm so shocked now.

"You should be more happy like the brat you are that I've given you my recognition. Should I drop the honorifics?"

Gunther was laughing delightedly at his own sarcastic remark, while I furrowed my brows. It feels like those words have completely overturned the nature of our relationship up until now. So far I really haven't experienced what it's like to be a noble and the domain lord, just the relationship between adults and children, instructor and apprentice, those are the only types of attitudes that Gunther has taken with me up until now.

It's really so sudden, I suppose there's no changing Gunther's view of me now.

"You're really not honest with your feelings."

"That's so true."

"…… Well…… whatever, …… fine. Besides that, there's something I want to talk about immediately. To have Agil be commanding up until now along the way, I wasn't…… informed of this."

Gunther's sarcasm with Claudia chiming in didn't sound all that bad at all. I tried to start a serious conversation immediately while Claudia was being relatively quiet for her. When the question was brought up to Gunther, he shrugged and laughed. He's not a very mature person.

"Our path was planned out in advance. We're really not going to pass by the village construction site?"

“No. If we head directly east to the new village the Monster Forest will be on our path, as well as many ponds. We’ll resupply at Cyril village.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it, I see, I see. At any rate, my lord probably just got into a fight of some sort with Kamil and doesn’t want to see his face.”

After leaving that remark, Gunther went back to the front of the marching formation. As expected because we’ve known each other for so long, he’s good at reading me. It wasn’t a fight though. It was one-sided, with me chasing him away.

When we arrived at Cyril village to resupply and rest for one night, it was just like last time during my birthday celebration, the atmosphere was filled with tension. Maybe it’s because this place is far away from other villages, the heavy feeling of being unwelcome here was extremely uncomfortable.

While feeling the sharp gazes of the villagers looking at me, I gave the order to resupply our water from the river flowing through the center of the village.

The rivers flowing through the Kaldia domain all have melted snow from the Amon Nor Mountains as their water source. Since Cyril village is the closest village to the mountains, they can use the water directly from the river as a clean source of drinking water.

I had my horse drink some water as well, wiped down its sweat, and fed it. The young boy novice soldier leading my horse didn’t have the strength to control him and lost control for a bit.

“S, sorry, my lord.”

“I don’t mind. Don’t waste your strength talking and try to recover some strength. Tomorrow we’re doubling our pace.”

Next to the village, we set up tents where about thirty of the soldiers would be sleeping tonight. The soldiers were able to set everything up swiftly and give orders efficiently, it must be due to the soldiers that returned from assisting with the village construction. We’ve collected a large number of tents from the neighboring domains for the sake of the new citizens, and they’re used to camping outside.

As I looked at the sight of me washing my hands in the river, and was able to get some rest for myself, the young boy novice soldier slowly came up next to me at a crawling pace, and sat down next to me.

He seems slightly older than Elise. He wasn't very tall, and he had a slender figure. He had fluffy, bouncy golden blonde hair. He looked at my hands in the river with strong curiosity in his eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"As you can see, I'm soaking my hands in the cool water."

My hands were damp with sweat due to gripping my reins tightly as to not fall off my horse, so immersing my hands in the river felt really good. The river water that had melted snow as its source felt nice and cool in the summer heat.

The boy novice soldier imitated me and submerged his hands in the water as well. Ah, it's really cold, escaped his mouth as he smiled happily.

"Ahh, I want to take a bath in this river."

"Although it's very hot, you're not allowed to enter the river. You'll get the water dirty. Soak a cloth in water and wipe yourself down with it instead."

"Okay. – Somehow, it doesn't feel like my lord is actually younger than me. Rather, it almost feels like you're the older one."

I didn't know what would be good to say to the boy who seemed like he was admiring me, so I looked back at the surface of the water. The boy next to me giggled. In this village of tense feelings, it gave a strangely calm feeling.

"Before I entered the Kaldia domain's army, the villagers were scared of my lord. When I actually saw you as well, I also thought that my lord was a scary person. My lord, it's because you don't laugh. But after talking with you today, I think it's okay to not be so scared of you."

"……"

"However, since my parents didn't really struggle all that much under the despotic rule of the previous domain lord, I might be the only one that feels this way. ……But, I

think that people will still be scared of my lord if they don't know how you really are. It's such a waste. Ah, even though my lord has a cute face, it's scary because you always have a grim expression. I think that's a waste as well."

Without even any context, he started a monologue on this topic for some reason, what's more he even offered his unsolicited opinion, but somehow, I still felt mysteriously calm, and didn't even mind that he was a bit meddlesome and listened to all of it. The summer heat around me was being blown away by the cool breeze coming down the mountains.

It almost feels like Kamil's talking with me. I wonder if it's because this boy's atmosphere resembles Kamil's in some way?

Finally, silence fell on the riverbank. For a while, the two of us merely listened to the sounds of the wind and the babbling river.

Suddenly, there was a commotion from the village, and the sky turned slightly crimson. As I looked at the sunlight reflecting off the water with a tinge of orange, Claudia called for me.

"Eliza-dono, it's an urgent situation."

On top of how rare it was for her to get my name right, Claudia looked more serious than I had ever seen her before. The boy novice soldier also looked at Claudia uneasily.

"What happened?"

"A monster has been discovered in the forest near the village. It seems similar to a gigantic rizer lizard. Anyways, please come to the tents first."

While making her report, Claudia was already lifting me up onto my horse. Then, she jumped on behind me, and while turning the horse around she called out to the boy novice soldier.

"Could you get some more details from the villagers? The person who discovered the monster should still be resting at the village hall."

"Yes!"

Chapter 34
Along the way, Part 2

I sat down in the back of the tent on a cushion, and the soldiers gathered around me and sat down in a circle, cross-legged in western style. We left the tent flaps half open, so that the air wouldn't get too stuffy. I stirred the cup of water that Claudia sitting next to me offered.

Across from Claudia was Gunther, and next to him was the soldier named Agil, and they had tense expressions on their faces.

By Claudia's side were some men and women in dirty clothes, looking at us nervously with extremely unsettled expressions. They seem to be the leaders of Cyril village's militia. There's not enough men in this domain, even women have to be part of the militia.

Sitting down in the innermost part of the tent was Cyril village's mayor, he was looking at me with a frightened expression. Due to the incident in this village before with the orphan girl, I see that the fear instilled in him for having him and his daughter flogged in front of the other villagers hasn't faded.

Sitting down in a place farthest from the center, was the boy novice soldier from before, looking around in puzzlement. It seems that his name is Paulo, and after being ordered by Claudia to collect information, he's returned really quickly.

"Paulo, report on the monster that the villagers saw."

"Y, yes!"

As expected, he wasn't used to these sorts of gatherings, and Paulo replied with a high-pitched voice filled with nervousness. He met Gunther's sharp gaze and squeaked a little, then swallowed his saliva several times to collect himself.

"According to the villagers, while patrolling to guard against the fire moths, in the forest just north of the village, they seem to have seen a large creature they've never seen before that look similar to a gigantic rizer earth lizard. Because it seems to prey on sheep, it could be damaging to the village if we just leave it alone."

A carnivorous gigantic lizard, eh. ……Indeed, it doesn't sound like we can just let it be. It's been discovered too close to the village. It's right next to the patrol route for guarding against the fire moths.

And if it really turns out to be magical beasts, I'll take measures against it described in the book on magical beasts.

"Do you have a more detailed description of the monster?"

"Yes. It's different from the earth lizard, instead of scales, it seems to be covered in some sort of crystal resembling rock and ice."

Then he went on to describe the more detailed features, and all I could imagine was a true monster. Since it snows year round at the Amon Nor Mountains close to here, there's many monsters with ice magic, so it's quite likely that it's some sort of gigantic ice lizard. Once again, I was faced with the fact that there were actual monsters within my domain.

"It's probably an ice lizard known as a Radoshishiruka. It's a type of magical beast with the magic to freeze anything it touches with its claws."

"Mmm, it'll be nice if we can catch one and preserve its meat for summer supplies."

Gunther made a joke, but unfortunately it didn't go over too well.

"No, we can't. Ice lizard claws contain poison, which will also attack whatever they freeze. We'll have to get rid of it before it attacks the village."

I concluded that the monster sighted in the forest was an ice lizard, and the village's militia was to surround the forest with torches of fire. Ice lizards are weak against fire, and hate the heat. It's very strange that such a creature would come down from the snowy mountains during the summer, but after all it's difficult to understand the abnormal monster behavior during their active periods.

"Claudia and I will remain outside the forest. Don't forget to heat your weapons up with fire before attacking them."

After our preparations were finished, we headed for the forest. Five soldiers carried buckets of red hot charcoal, for the sake of another ten weapon wielding soldiers.

Even if they get injured against the ice lizard and are no longer able to go to Fort Jugfena, this number can be replaced by people from the village.

Gunther led them with spear in hand, and the soldiers entered the forest in droves. The trees gradually hid them from sight, and soon I couldn't even see their shadows anymore.

"It'll be good if they can finish this safely……"

Paulo standing behind me muttered that under his breath. He hadn't entered the forest, and he had probably picked up on the anxiety of the villagers surrounding the forest with torches.

"If you're someone that believes in the path of military arts, then proudly believe in your companions, and wait for them without getting flustered."

When Claudia chimed in with a calmer voice than usual, Paulo hurriedly straightened his back and turned to face the forest again. The silence caused the feeling of tension in the air to spread.

Then – the yelling of the soldiers could be heard from within the forest.

Everyone couldn't help but stare at the forest. A sense of urgency was transmitted along with their cries. Someone beside me audibly gulped.

Mixed in with the soldiers' screams, the sound of Gunther roaring resounded through the air. I could tell that they were struggling, and I clenched my sleeves tightly.

"……Hey, isn't it getting colder?"

I wonder who it was that mentioned it first.

Imperceptibly, the air around us had begun to chill, and people were beginning to rub their arms as they detected the cold. Since it's summer, everyone was wearing short sleeves, and they were trying to warm themselves up as the air had now gotten noticeably colder.

At this moment, a mysterious sound came from the forest.

It was a small sound that sounded like the cracking of a whip. When the sound began to repeat itself over and over again, the soldiers in the forest could be heard raising their voices in anger and confusion. Along with their screams, it sounded like hard objects were clashing with each other.

Something strange is happening in there. It was completely silent outside the forest. Including me, everyone's eyes were glued to the forest.

"L, look at that! The forest is freezing over!"

One of the villagers shouted that in panic. A commotion immediately began spreading.

When I looked at the direction the person who had shouted was pointing at, the trees were really freezing over, encased in ice. Slowly but surely, the area of ice was spreading. The area being frozen over just kept increasing. Finally, from the forest's direction, a voice could be heard saying the same thing.

"Enough magic to freeze over the entire forest, eh……"

The cold air from earlier must have been caused by this. Whether Gunther and the others were still alright, I was quite anxious. Everything must be frozen solid around the ice lizard.

The fact that they had leather armor instead of metal armor has actually helped out for once. If they had been wearing metal armor on top of their light summer clothing, they probably would have taken much more damage due to frostbite.

Even if screams were coming from the forest, all I could do was listen to them.

Then, Claudia suddenly jumped in front of me.

Before I could even ask why, a gigantic lizard that was knocking down the trees in its path appeared in front of Claudia. The ice lizard had arrows stuck all over its body, and silver blood was flowing out of its injuries at a fast rate.

"Wah! It appeared!"

Behind us, the villagers were all screaming.

“Paulo-dono, get back!!”

At the same time that Paulo grabbed me and started retreating, prompted by Claudia’s voice, Claudia pulled out her sword from her waist. Her sword wasn’t very long, but she threw it with an amazing amount of force for such a slender wrist at the ice lizard.

Thud, the sword made a sound as it pierced the ice lizard’s head. However, the gigantic lizard still didn’t perish. It opened its huge mouth and revealed a set of fiendishly sharp teeth, and eyed the obstacle in front of it, Claudia.

“Claudia!!”

I couldn’t help but shout out her name.

Claudia’s long golden hair was beautifully spreading in the air. Its beauty seemed terribly out of place here, as I watched Claudia gracefully jumping and dodging. She escaped the jaws of the ice lizard, and with both hands, she stabbed her spear into the ice lizard’s neck.

A larger, duller sound rang out than when the sword had struck the ice lizard. Claudia had used her own weight and momentum to be able to pierce through the ice lizard entirely.

I snatched a torch from a villager standing close to me.

“Claudia-dono, fire!”

Despite the danger, Claudia grabbed the torch I threw at her with one hand. She heated up her spear stuck in the ice lizard with the torch.

The ice lizard was wriggling violently. From where the heated spear pierced it, it was spouting white smoke that seemed very much like water vapor.

“Keep going just like that!”

Gunther suddenly appeared from the forest, and swung down his broadsword in his right hand at the ice lizard’s neck.

Following him, more soldiers also appeared, surrounded the ice lizard, and swung their swords.

A pool of silver blood spread quickly around their feet.

Before long, the ice lizard finally stopped moving, and the soldiers finally collapsed down onto the ground.

The corpse of this ice lizard that was covered in a spear, arrows, swords, and its own blood, was quite a sublime sight to behold.

Chapter 35
Along the way, Part 3

I mobilized the remaining soldiers and had them dismember the ice lizard's corpse, and burn it a distance away from the village. According to their report, even its bones melted and nothing remained.

The soldiers that had done battle with it suffered some frostbite, but it wasn't too severe, and they were able to make gradual recoveries with application of warm water.

After a night's rest, as we were preparing to depart for Fort Jugfena early next morning, we saw several villagers heading our way.

Gunther moved slightly in front of me as if to protect me. Claudia, who hasn't been living in the Kaldia domain for that long, doesn't know the political situation here and the villagers' hostility towards me. Gunther remembers the birthday celebration incident here.

The people who had come were the village mayor, a man and a woman from the militia that I saw in the tent yesterday, and two women I didn't know. One of the women was still very young, and her facial features resembled the village mayor, so I figured that she was probably his daughter.

She's probably the one that was flogged along with the mayor for their complicity in inciting Ratoka to attack me. The other woman's probably the woman named Marley that had allowed Ratoka to live with her.

"What are you doing here!"

Since the village mayor had brought along the two people punished with him for that incident, all the soldiers were alert and on guard. Their hostility towards the mayor was evident, and he stopped right when they spoke up.

"Good morning. I would like to thank the domain lord-sama and everyone from the domain army for defeating the magical beast……"

“If that was really your intention, why’d you bring those two women along with you?”

In front of the soldiers that had clearly threatening attitudes, the two people from the militia were trembling in fear. However, the two women behind them were looking down at the ground and seemed calm.

Slowly and quietly, I reached for the hilt of the short sword in my waist. The people of Cyril village hate those of Kaldia blood more than any other village, and I don’t know what they might attempt in a fit of passion.

“The child that was responsible for committing the crime of treason has already been executed. Why exactly have you appeared in front of my lord!”

The soldier that had called out the village mayor on why he came here was gripping his spear tightly with his hands. Gunther, and even Claudia who had a puzzled expression, both had their hands on their swords as well.

At that moment, the village mayor’s daughter raised her face. She looked at the soldiers resolutely, and she even looked Gunther, Claudia, and me directly in the eyes. I don’t know what she’s thinking, and I looked back into her eyes to try and read her emotions. Our eyes met for only a little less than two seconds.

Suddenly, the girl kneeled and lowered her head.

“!?”

The soldiers were confused because they couldn’t tell what the girl was trying to do. The other woman, as if imitating the girl, kneeled as well.

The village mayor and the two militia members silently moved next to them. The two women prostrated themselves before me.

“W, what’s this……”

“Please listen, soldier-sama, these two……”

“We know very well our rudeness towards my lord. But, please, domain lord-sama, I beg you, forgive the two of us!”

Interrupting the village mayor, his daughter implored me directly in a loud voice while still kneeling.

This could be considered very disrespectful. For commoners such as villagers, they're not supposed to directly address the nobility unless given permission. The girl might not know this however, and her voice sounded desperate for some reason, she sounded quite tragical.

What have you done, was the expression the mayor had on his face as he looked at the two of them. His daughter's actions seem to have been completely unexpected for the mayor. I could tell that he had a bitter taste in his mouth from his angry expression at his daughter deciding to do something on her own without his permission.

I looked at the two of them bowing their heads towards me. Why did they seem that desperate, I wonder. I couldn't see their expressions, and I couldn't even analyze their tone of voice as neither of them had said anything since the girl's outburst.

"Gunther,"

"You better not say something stupid."

"……but I didn't even say anything yet."

With a strained expression full of tension, Gunther interrupted what I was going to say. But, I'm really not the type to give orders without having thought things over carefully first.

"Gunther, capture those two women and bring them in front of me."

"Like I said…… Huh?"

"For their disrespect towards me just now, I said to capture them. They're people that were associated with an act of treason, I don't know what they could be plotting. Bring the two of them to me, and I'll punish them directly."

I suppressed myself so that my voice wouldn't shake while giving my orders, and it sounded terribly dispassionate and cold to me. I wonder if it's because a child's high-pitched voice carries well and is easy to hear, I noticed the two kneeling women's shoulders trembling.

Gunther looked at me with a dumbfounded look on his face. The soldiers surrounding me, the other two paralyzed villagers, everyone was looking at me with their mouths wide agape.

A gentle wind blew past the grassy field, shaking the blades of grass. Zaa, the sound of whistling wind surrounded us.

“What are you doing, Gunther. Your master is ordering you.”

While everyone was busy standing still looking at me, the next voice that spoke up was Claudia’s. Her favorite spear was in her right hand, and her golden hair was fluttering in the breeze as she weaved through the soldiers.

Gunther hurriedly followed after her. The two of them held the two kneeling women’s wrists behind their backs, restraining them as they rose up.

Claudia walked the girl in front of me without any hesitation. In comparison, Gunther couldn’t hide his confusion as he followed behind Claudia with the other woman.

This time, the two women were brought in front of me and made to kneel again, but even so they haven’t made a single sound of complaint.

“Did you know that you’re guilty of being disrespectful towards a noble? The girl with the red hair, you may answer.”

When I indicated for the mayor’s daughter to speak, her answer was an immediate no! And this time, her voice was shaking.

“What is it that you wanted me to know so badly, I wonder. You may speak briefly. I’ll listen to it before I decide on your punishment. Raise your head.”

Even I felt that the words coming out of my mouth were so arrogant. However, by some miracle Claudia seemed to understand my true intentions, and she didn’t use too much force on the girl, and tapped her gently on the shoulder to encourage her.

Although I had ostensibly called the two of them in front of me to punish them, my true goal was to listen to what they wanted. Even if the two of them really did intend to do me harm instead of wanting to apologize, I have the strongest two people in my army holding them down, so that should reduce the risk to me.

It's reasonable that Claudia, who was raised as a noble, would understand what I'm doing faster than Gunther did. Even though Claudia normally behaves the way she does, at certain times it feels like there's such a gap in her abilities when she suddenly becomes competent like this.

The two women raised their heads, and looked me in the face. Then, their faces turned truly pale.

"……, Domain lord, sama……"

Their voices were shaking so badly, that I couldn't help but raise my eyebrow. They kept staring at me in a daze, their eyes were filled with fear, and they were biting their lips.

"-That's right. I'm Eliza Kaldia, your domain lord."

Surely to the two of them, they must have seen my father in me. With my straight black hair that reflected the sunlight, and my red eyes the color of blood, I'm the spitting image of my father after all.

Chapter 36
Along the way, Part 4

"- What's the matter. To have committed such disrespect towards me, it must have been because you had something to beg of me."

I wonder what it could be that they had to beg of me when they've already committed such a crime against me before. Being confronted with the villagers' stupidity right in front of me, my mind wandered off from the two women kneeling in front of me and what they had to talk about.

Currently in the Kaldia domain, there's no sacred shrines dedicated to the Ar Xia church. Since teaching the laws is considered the work of the church, and that villagers usually don't hire teachers, I remembered that during my birthday celebration, it didn't take place at a sacred shrine like it was supposed to, and villagers took the place of church officials instead.

By the way, all the church's sacred shrines in Kaldia had been destroyed by my father. His reason was that "they were too luxurious."

At that time, there was an economic crisis in the domain caused by father, so he made a law banning extravagance. The domain's citizens originally had modest dwellings and lifestyles to begin with, while those from the church had better stone dwellings, and were able to afford slightly fancier clothing as well. He probably chased the church out because the people's lives had been so poor for several years that they could barely keep the roofs over their heads, and the church was calling attention to it.

Using the excuse of rebuilding the domain, father had seized money, food, and people from the citizens, and the clergy from other domains were excluded from here so they couldn't call attention to the terrible situation here, so education level is at a minimum. Basically if he kept outsiders out of the domain, the people here wouldn't know any better. Well, this all happened fifteen years ago anyways.

In order to help the new citizens assimilate, it'll be best if I can get the church to return. Ever since this kingdom was founded, it's been inseparable from the church.

“Please, I implore you. We’ll pay the fee for the incident that orphan caused, so please don’t take us away to become ‘laborers’……!”

Interrupting my thoughts, I heard a heartrending cry. I blinked, snapping myself out of my thoughts, and looked back at the two women kneeling in front of me. What did she just say? Laborer……?

“……I see, so that’s what it was about. I understand.”

The girl’s shoulders were shaking badly. It seems that my voice came out colder than I thought it would. However, although I understood why the two of them seemed so desperate and sad, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of disappointment now.

Father would gleefully kill any citizens that committed crimes. On top of that, he would force entire villages to be responsible for criminals as well and have to pay “fees” or else be subjected to becoming a “laborer.”

“……Could you stop thinking that I’m the same as the previous domain lord?”

I sentenced the two women to travel along with us to Fort Jugfena in order to atone for their disrespect. Claudia did a simple check on their bodies, and she didn’t find anything like poison or a weapon.

Since Fort Jugfena is likely to become a battlefield soon, the village mayor tried to appeal to me as I was going to be taking his only daughter along with me, but when I asked him if he wanted to take responsibility on her behalf instead, he quieted down.

And so, although it was still dim and early in the morning, we finally started heading for Fort Jugfena again.

“Have the two of them carry some of our things. Paulo, I’m putting you in charge of watching them.”

Today as well he was the novice soldier in charge of leading my horse’s reins, and I ordered him to go to the front and have the two women carry some light items.

Since my horse isn't going at a fast pace, I don't really need someone to pull the reins for me. Although he was leading my horse in name, it was more like all he was doing was keeping me company and chatting with me.

"Eh, ah, yes."

At receiving his sudden order, Paulo looked at Gunther for a moment. However, when he saw that Claudia next to him was nodding, he went over to the front without saying anything.

Again, Claudia was able to understand my true intentions quickly. Since the other soldiers have terrible attitudes towards the two women as they were associated with the orphan's act of treason, I figured I'd have Paulo accompany them instead, and it must have appealed to her code of chivalry, because her eyes seemed to be sparkling.

Because Claudia never hides her feelings, in a way, it's actually more fun to be with her than anyone else. She's not like a noble at all and allows herself to be swayed by her feelings too easily, but at the very least, there was no need to be on guard with her and look for hidden intentions.

But, taking Claudia's feelings into consideration, I won't be able to take the two women to the actual forefront of battle at Fort Jugfena. It can be said that it's a weak point if I want to use Claudia. Given the current situation, I can only leave things up to Claudia, and trust her to guard my life.

I simply had the two women carry some light items, since Claudia's an important person that I need to use until I'm able to safely return to Kaldia from Fort Jugfena. She probably understands that I can't simply just send any other soldier to look after them. After all, Claudia and I are the only other females.

We made camp tonight as we neared the border of my domain. Just like yesterday, the soldiers handily put up some tents, cooked some food with simple stoves, and put up a simple wooden fence around the area.

Because we're in the lake area, it's terribly muddy. The soldiers washed their feet and shoes at the nearby lake, and hunted for some food in the surrounding forest.

I remained at the tents. As long as there's no urgent situation, it seems that the nobility are allowed to take it easy. Of course, the flip side of it is that nobles are supposed to work harder for the sake of everyone if there actually is an urgent situation.

Just like yesterday, I sat down where a cushion and cloth had been provided for me on the ground, and I played with a rock that I picked up that I felt resembled a chess piece from my previous life, and Claudia waiting beside me began to pace about restlessly.

When I followed her line of sight to outside the tent, it seems that the two women I had brought with us from Cyril village had lit up a fire in one of the stoves. They seemed to be much better at using the stoves than the soldiers, and it seemed like Claudia had something she wanted to say.

"……Claudia-dono."

"Ooh, do you need me to do something?"

"I would like some hot water, could I trouble you to get some for me?"

I implied that she could go over to the stove, and a joyful smile blossomed on Claudia's face. Since Gunther's also guarding the entrance to the tent, it's not much of a problem even if I send Claudia a slight ways off.

"I'll bring some to you right away!"

Claudia flew out of the tent with so much energy. ……When she returned later, it took a few seconds for her to realize that she had forgotten to bring me any water.

Chapter 37
Fort Jugfena

The next day, unfortunately the weather worsened, and we continued towards the Jugfena royal domain while it was drizzling. We couldn't tell the time because we couldn't see the sun, and we had to proceed carefully so as to not go in the wrong direction with this low visibility.

While everything was misty, we just kept following the path to the right, and we arrived in front of a forest that was much denser than the other ones in Kaldia. It was said that a primeval forest once covered this entire area, and what's left of it now has become known as the "Monster Forest." I could hear what sounded like the sounds of beasts and insects coming from the forest along with the sound of falling raindrops.

"This place gives off a bad feeling……"

That voice came from one of the soldiers. Maybe it's because of the rain, even though it was summer there was a chill in the air. The soldiers might all be tired as well, everyone kept marching on in complete silence.

"Gunther, raise our speed to an extent that we won't get lost again."

"Understood. I want to get out of here as quickly as possible too. Even being outside the Monster Forest, makes my heart nervous."

Even Gunther who was such a fearless person thought so, and this road had an eerie atmosphere to it. While holding on the the reins of my horse, I looked at the forest to my right. Due to the rain, its outline was dark and I couldn't see it clearly. Although there's still quite a distance to the forest, it felt like the Monster Forest was a looming presence, maybe it's because the forest takes up such a large portion of my field of vision.

Suddenly, I felt like within its grey shadows, a bloodstained red was spreading. When I blinked, it was gone already, I wonder if it was an optical illusion, since I couldn't see it anymore.

But while I was busy focusing on the forest, I heard a cheer from the soldiers in the front.

“I can see it! We’ve reached Fort Jugfena!”

At hearing that, all the soldiers cheered. On the other side of the drizzle, the shadow of the giant man made structure was vaguely asserting its presence.

As we got closer to it, I was gradually able to make out the contours and features of the gigantic fortress. Fort Jugfena, is the only place where people live in the Jugfena royal domain. Rain was drizzling down on the fort made of polished black stone and metal, and it had towers spaced uniformly apart with the Arxian flag on top of them, with walls taller than the Mansion of Golden Hills I live in. Unlike the castles in the royal capital, there was absolutely zero decorative elements, but I felt that its systematic nature seemed supremely magnificent.

The Kaldia army’s soldiers had never left Kaldia before, and even Claudia as well though she should be used to the castles in the royal capital, they were all staring at the black iron fort with mouths wide agape. I was no exception. In front of this overwhelmingly beautiful fort, the Kaldia army proceeded while being fascinated by it like fools.

“Mm, Elena-dono, over there.”

Claudia who seemed to have the vision of a wild beast was pointing to the bottom of the fort. Her eyesight was even good enough to find one speck of grain in the large kitchen.

“It’s not Elena, it’s Eliza.”

“Did I get it wrong again…… I’m sorry. Please excuse me.”

I shortened my usual correction of her as I had mostly given up already, and squinted at the place Claudia was pointing at. Since my horse was still proceeding along in the meantime, when we got a bit closer I was finally able to see what Claudia was pointing at.

“Are those…… the refugees’ tents?”

Surrounding the fort, completely different from the tent I used, were rows of simple tents meant for use by soldiers. They were spread out around the side of the fort as far as I could see.

Even though it was raining, I could see people coming and going from the tents, not minding the rain. Then I changed my line of sight to our objective, the fort that took us three days of marching to get here. We stopped in front of the fort's doors, and as my leading military commander, Gunther reported my arrival to the fort's gatekeeper. In front of me were gigantic wooden doors kept behind iron chain mesh, I could truly tell that this castle was intended to be a fortress.

Maybe the refugees can tell that Claudia and I are of higher status since we're on horses, their lines of sight were all on us. All they were doing was gawking at us, there wasn't much expression on their faces. There were those that kept staring at us silently, as well as those that lost interest and returned to their tents. They all seemed unhealthily skinny, I could tell that they all appeared to be exhausted and emaciated.

I'm sorry, but right now I'm not here to welcome you. I put what I had just seen away in a corner of my mind.

In the meantime, the gigantic door in front of me opened. Gunther gave the order for everyone to advance, and we slowly entered the castle in columns of marching soldiers. There was a row of soldiers on either side of us, leaving enough space for us to pass by between them. We passed them by as we entered the fort. The fort was brightly lit inside by torches, and we passed by some stables on the first floor where there was a wide space that many horses were resting at.

"Thank you very much for coming over, Viscountess Kaldia."

"I'm much obliged for your welcome. As promised, I've brought along fifty soldiers from the Kaldia army."

We were being guided by soldiers from the fort, and the knight that had been the messenger to the Kaldia domain the other day arrived to greet me. I suppose he might be the one in charge of being our liaison. Today, since he wasn't wearing a helmet and his hair was down, he seemed younger than before. If anything, I'd say that his current appearance matches his true age more. But, I don't have any idea what his age is.

"On behalf of my lord Earl Einsbark, thank you very much for your pure and noble knightly spirit."

The man knelt and greeted me in a special knightly pose and ceremonial manner. He basically had his right hand touching his left shoulder. As expected of an actual knight, his movements were elegant and graceful.

As for Claudia whose dream was to become a knight, her eyes were sparkling with excitement as she watched the knight carrying out his formal greeting. This is bad, this is her expression right before she loses control of herself.

“I’m sorry about the inconvenience even though we’ve just arrived, but I wonder if my soldiers can get some rest now. Since we unexpectedly had to deal with exterminating a magical beast on our way here, they’re a bit tired.”

“Of course.”

The knight issued instructions to the soldiers that had been guiding us, and my soldiers went up to the second floor with them.

Meanwhile, I ordered Claudia to bring those two women over here. Those two women that I brought along with me from Cyril village, when they first entered this stone and metal fortress, they were too frightened to even look at the refugees, and seemed to be at a loss for what to do. For now, I’m just going to say that they’re my and Claudia’s maids, and that tomorrow I’m going to have Claudia accompany them back to Cyril village.

“So, just for tonight, would it be alright to loan a room to these maids as well?”

“Ahh, there’s plenty of extra rooms. It’s no problem.”

The knight nodded at my second request, and then I continued speaking.

“I still haven’t heard your name yet. I apologize for not asking up until now.”

“I don’t mind. I thank you for the respect you’ve shown me. Allow me to introduce myself, I’m Ergnade Einsbark. I’m the leader of the 1st Cavalry Platoon at Fort Jugfena. Since I’m in charge of being the liaison with you guys, I think we’ll be getting to know each other very well. I’ll be in your care.”

……Einsbark? This is an unexpected name that I’m hearing.

Since he had been a messenger knight, I thought that he would be just a low-ranking knight, but to think he was a military commander. What's more, since his last name is Einsbark, that means he's related to the earl that's the leader here. With such a high rank, he's to be our liaison?

I wonder what Earl Einsbark is up to, selecting such a person to be our liaison. Not knowing what that sly old fox, the cunning veteran knight Earl Einsbark could be planning or thinking, my habit of being on guard reared its ugly neck.

Chapter 38
True to one's desires

Ergnade guided us to our rooms, and as soon as he carefully closed the door behind him and exited, Claudia couldn't contain her excitement anymore and jumped on top of a bed.

"Wah!?"

At Claudia's sudden, eccentric action, both of the women from Cyril village jumped. It was too sudden for them.

Claudia buried her face in the sheets, rolled around, and wrinkled the sheets. Stop, you're going to make a mess of my bed……

"Ahh…… Being a knight, it's so dignified and beautiful!"

With her face still buried in the bed, Claudia made such a comment. I was amazed and speechless, and just looked at Claudia with a strange feeling. She really likes the idea of being a knight way too much.

"……You two, it seems that the room to the right of this one will be yours for tonight, so please stay there."

"Y, yes."

I don't know whether I should say the two women were amazed or frozen solid, but I ordered them to their room, and sighed deeply as I was now left alone with Claudia.

"Claudia-dono, your spear fell over."

"What!?"

Claudia, who seems to have returned to her senses, raised her face. At the same time, she saw her favorite spear that had fallen down onto the floor, then she saw me and my amazed expression, and she got off the bed, realizing the way she had been acting.

“S, sorry……”

“Please fix the sheets properly.”

As I sat down on a chair in front of the desk by the window, I sighed again as I was tired, and stretched. As expected, riding a horse for three days straight to get here with a six year old’s body, I’m sore all over.

After I took a glance at Claudia to make sure that she was fixing the sheets, I looked outside the window. For defensive purposes, the window had iron bars. On the other side of the glass, I could see the ramparts that were considered the national boundaries. It’s made basically the same way as this fort, and there was a gate that was currently shut on the tall rampart walls.

On the other side of the rampart, is the Densel Dukedom. This place is on the frontlines of defending our country, seeing this for myself, I felt some tension as well. Something might happen at any time, just as I was bracing myself –

“Nooo, why can’t I get it nice and straight like the maids do!?”

Suddenly, Claudia’s idiotic voice interrupted my thoughts. I couldn’t help but collapse on the desk, losing the strength in my arms to prop myself up.

It seems that Claudia was struggling with the bed sheets, and because it wasn’t going well, she was getting frustrated. Before she could rip the sheets, I hurriedly stopped her and told her it’s fine. Claudia still seemed worked up and dissatisfied at the situation, and she turned and faced me, and spoke up seriously.

“Erin-dono, please let me remain here and guard you after all.”

“It’s Eliza. No.”

“Sorry, I got it wrong again. ……I think it was a good idea to say that those two were our maids. But if I’m not here because I have to escort them back, who will Eliza-dono leave things up to here in the meantime?”

I wonder if it’s because she came in contact with an actual knight, she’s even more insistent than usual. However, it’s useless even if she begs me with those puppy eyes of hers. As Claudia stared at me with those blue eyes of hers, resembling a cat, she tried to overwhelm me with her feelings.

“Of course I can leave things up to the soldiers, and I can take care of myself. Claudia-dono, you’re a guest that’s been entrusted to me by the Rolentsor family. You really shouldn’t be here at such a dangerous place. It’s the same for those two women as well. Since if they stay here they could be in danger, I’m requesting this of Claudia-dono.”

“……I give up. Got it, I’m sorry. I’ve been too selfish.”

Claudia’s head was drooping down, and just like that she went and laid down on the bed. Because it was so rare to see her quiet like this, even though her being quiet was great for me, I couldn’t help but ask her a question.

“Claudia-dono, why are you so enchanted with the idea of being a knight?”

Like a spring, she suddenly bounced back up. A smile popped up on her face like she was blossoming, and she was looking at me with sparkling eyes. At the great change in her, I asked myself mentally if I had spoken prematurely.

“Thank you for asking, let me tell you!”

……And my answer was, I had indeed been too hasty.

According to Claudia, who was actually acting somewhat embarrassed, she started from an episode in her early childhood about her having no talent in anything whatsoever, apart from martial arts and military arts, and wanting to be recognized by her immensely talented older brother.

Her prowess in battle was indeed strong, so with her abilities, she would have a place in Arxian society. Her academics were terrible and she wasn’t eligible to learn territory management as a girl that wasn’t likely to inherit, but she was treated equal to boys with regards to military arts. Claudia proudly said that her parents had a saying, if you have the free time to be sewing, you might as well be strengthening your spear skills instead, it’s considered normal in her family, although it’s still rather unusual for an Arxian girl to possess such high combat skills.

Her older brother, who was probably worried about Claudia’s lack of interest in anything girl-like and her lack of self-confidence, seems to have told her that she had the talent to become an amazing knight. It seems that he used to be cold towards Claudia because his younger sister had been better with the spear than he was, but in the end he seems to have managed to swallow his pride and encourage his little sister.

It was an interesting story in its own way, I listened to it in silence, only responding occasionally to let her know I was paying attention.

“My older brother is a splendid knight now! I admire him so much!”

Claudia’s eyes were starry like those of a maiden in love, it’s just that what she was dreaming of was running around a battlefield, becoming a knight. In front of her overflowing hopes and dreams, I could only give a small sigh.

“Come to think of it, Eliza-dono, don’t you have any?”

“Any what?”

Claudia’s cheerful face looked at me expectantly, and she asked me a question with no context at all. This time she didn’t get my name wrong, how rare.

“Do you have anything you’re aiming for?”

“Right now, I’m aiming to become a great domain lord.”

“That’s not what I mean….. Mmm.”

It seems that it wasn’t the answer she wanted to hear, and she furrowed her eyebrows as she was thinking.

“That’s, um…… Rather than what you want to be, is there something that you absolutely have to become?”

“?”

Claudia seemed to be trying her hardest to come up with the right words to say, but after not getting the response she wanted twice in a row, Claudia began clutching her head and muttering, trying to think of what to say.

“Um um um…… Uh, as an example, what does Eliza-dono want to do?”

“Want to do…… Right now, I want to help the new citizens adjust to their new village as soon as possible. After that, I want to get the church to return to the domain……”

“Isn’t that part of your work as a domain lord?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“But that’s not what I mean……”

Uuu, her muttering had changed to whining. With her face between her hands and a silly expression on her face, moaning and whining, she looked ridiculous, ruining her appearance even though she was a beauty. It felt like a travesty upon my eyes, so I averted my eyes and looked outside the window.

“……Other than things related to your domain, doesn’t Eliza-dono have anything you want to do?”

After a while, Claudia finally managed to think of something to say. Other than things related to my domain……?

Mmm, as I went over the things I wanted to do in my head one by one, every one of them had to do with being a domain lord or being a noble. It was to the extent where I began admiring myself, for my lack of selfishness in not having anything I wanted to do for myself. Finally, Kamil’s face suddenly came to my mind, but I immediately got rid of him by shaking my head.

“There’s nothing.”

“There’s nothing?”

Claudia was seriously looking at me with an incredulous expression on her face. Wanting to get married to someone would be considered pretty ordinary, and among all the things that people wanted to do, for her that so single-mindedly wanted to become a knight, it might be a little hard for her to understand me.

“……You don’t have any desires?”

“I don’t think that’s quite accurate, either.”

“Although I’m aiming to become a knight, I’d also like to eat boiled eggs until my stomach bursts, or be able to use magic like monsters can, I have plenty of wishes unrelated to me becoming a knight. Is there really nothing for you?”

I tried to think of something specific, but I was still unable to come up with anything. I shook my head, and Claudia scratched her head.

“Hmm, as I thought, you don’t have any desires.”

This time I didn’t deny it, and just shrugged. The fact that I’m not completely selfless, I know perfectly well myself.

I have a wish as well.

– I want to be forgiven. Someone, anyone, in any way, even though I don’t deserve it, can’t I be forgiven, I’ve always been wishing for it.

To have no desires, of course that’s not possible.

Chapter 39
Earl Einsbark

As I passed the time chatting with Claudia, having nothing else to do, after quite some time passed Ergnade invited us to dinner. During this time, the drizzle outside was gradually slowing, and outside the fort's windows, I was able to see the sun again. Although in the Kaldia domain, due to the Amon Nor Mountains blocking the sun, it gets dark quite early, but since to the east of Fort Jugfena is wide open plains, it's plenty bright even during dinnertime.

"Are you dissatisfied in any way with your room, Viscountess Kaldia?"

"There's no problems. Thank you very much."

"I see. It seems that everyone from the Kaldia army is liking their rooms as well. They're more disciplined than I would have expected. Usually, when we have armies from other domains coming here for the first time, they tend to complain about things here."

As we walked down the hallway together, Ergnade tried to make small chat, although he seemed unfamiliar with it. While I made the appropriate responses, Claudia following along behind us was staring at him happily. Although I'm not obsessed with being a knight or anything, somehow I felt like following her example and observed him closely.

He seemed slightly older than Margrave Molton, I wonder if he's about Gunther's age or so. Now that I look at him closer, his facial features, especially his nose, did indeed resemble Earl Einsbark's, who I saw at the House of Lords before. His muscular back seemed almost like a pillar to me.

Today he wasn't in ceremonial dress, but in knightly attire instead, which was full black. It seems that the colors assigned to Fort Jugfena by the king were black and silver, although the only silver I saw Ergnade wearing was the knight emblem embroidered onto his cloak.

"……Those black clothes look very sharp on you."

“Hm? Ahh. Indeed. I iron them every morning.”

Even though I was just paying him a vague compliment, Ergnade answered me with a deadpan expression on his face as he touched his own cloak. Then he grinned, and said somewhat proudly, “doesn’t it look cool?”

He’s a bit mischievous, was my first impression of him.

As we arrived at the dining hall for nobles, and I saw the painting decorating it, it made me think of Earl Terejia’s residence in the royal capital. The floor was carpeted, there was wallpaper on the walls, and there was even a bright chandelier hanging from the ceiling. There were velvety cloth curtains hanging from the windows as well, hiding the iron bars from view.

In this dining hall, it was so ornate that it could cause one to forget that this was actually a fortress of black iron. The glittering hurts my eyes. Since the glare from the chandelier was annoying, I avoided looking at it as much as possible.

Several people were already seated at the long table in the dining hall, including Gunther at the farthest end who seemed frozen solid. At the seat of honor was Earl Einsbark, with two men that looked like his sons sitting next to him. Everyone was wearing black knightly attire similar to Ergnade, it felt almost like a funeral, was the thought that flashed into my head.

Although in actuality, Arxian funerals have white attire, not black, but I’m just recalling memories from my previous life.

“Ahh, thank you for coming, Viscountess Kaldia.”

Earl Einsbark sitting in the farthest back stood up and held out his hands in a welcoming manner. Although just like the first time I saw him, he had the face of a strong knight in the prime of life, this time he didn’t have a strict expression like the one he had at the House of Lords, but rather a soft smile much like Ergnade’s.

“I’m very grateful that you’ve brought fifty brave soldiers from Kaldia, so as a welcome, although it may not be much, I had this modest meal prepared for you. Please enjoy yourself.”

“I’m honored and deeply thankful for this feast that you’ve prepared for me.”

Earl Einsbark’s eyes were soft, almost as if he was looking at a grandchild. Ergnade guided me to a seat on the earl’s left, then guided Claudia to a seat as well before sitting down himself at a seat much farther down the table.

“In order for us to live on, forgive us for the lives we take for this meal. All sins and virtues shall be judged by the scales of Xia.”

Well, I suppose this is sort of a more formal version of “let us partake in this meal” from Japan. It seems that in the neighboring country right next to us, the typical prayer before meals is “we are deeply grateful to the gods for this meal today.” Since I wasn’t religious in my previous life, I’m deeply grateful myself that I wasn’t born in the neighboring country and have to say such a thing before every meal.

“I’m very sorry to bring this up right after asking the forgiveness of the gods, but is it alright for me to introduce the people here to you now?”

“Of course, no problem.”

As I nodded, Earl Einsbark pointed to the man sitting right next to him. His hair color was similar to Ergnade’s, albeit slightly greyer, and he was a middle-aged man that resembled the earl even more than Ergnade did. He nodded at me politely.

“This is Volmar. He’s my eldest son, and the commander of the cavalry troops at Fort Jugfena. Next,”

The man sitting next to Volmar had beautiful features, and smiled gently at me just like Earl Einsbark did. Compared to his family, he was the only one with delicate features, and I couldn’t help but think that he looked weaker.

“This is my second son, Wiegraf. Although he’s a knight as well, since he’s not that skilled at martial arts, he’s a military strategist. He looks so similar to my wife, I wonder if it’s because of that?”

Although he was laughing easily, I noticed that my jaw muscles had stiffened up a bit unconsciously. It seemed like that parent and child could joke around with each other easily, and I remembered the way that Ergnade was being mischievous as he guided me here, so I relaxed slightly.

“Over there is Ergnade. He’s my third son, who cunningly contacted you before I did.”

“F, father……”

“I’m just joking. I’ve heard that Earl Terejia has become the guardian of a certain child, so I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

As Earl Einsbark said so, he laughed happily, ha ha! At the same moment, his eldest son Volmar who had appeared straightlaced up until now, burst out into laughter. Wiegraf and Ergnade snickered as well.

At seeing them, this time, I relaxed myself completely. Claudia and Gunther who had also both been nervous and frozen up, had started laughing as well before I realized it.

I had been worried that the Einsbark family might be difficult to deal with, but they seem like quite the peaceful family. Although the neighboring country’s invasion was still on my mind, that I don’t seem to be despised here for being that evil villain’s daughter, I felt a bit of relief.

Chapter 40
The black iron fortress, Part 1

Gong…… an echoing loud noise shook my entire body. The bell in the central tower of this fort was being struck. I sleepily got up due to the sound while yawning, as the purpose of the bell was to wake everyone up.

There's no water clocks here at Fort Jugfena, and the tolling sound of the bell is meant to tell time instead. After all, manpower would be required to maintain a water clock. Since there's no maids or foot soldiers that are only required to do menial labor here, it would take too much to keep a water clock operational. The villages in Kaldia mainly use sundials rather than water clocks as well, but for the soldiers and knights, I think auditory information is probably more convenient for them than visual information.

The first time that I heard the bell ringing, it felt so loud and discomforting that I had to plug up my ears, but I've gotten used to it quickly. Even I feel that it's convenient now.

It's been exactly seven days since I've arrived at Fort Jugfena.

I squinted through the rugged iron bars on the window at the rays of twilight shining through. Today's dawn sky seemed strangely red for some reason.

"Good morning, Viscountess Kaldia. Today, Earl Einsbark has granted permission for you to observe our training grounds."

When I finished dressing myself appropriately and left my room, a man sharply dressed in black knight attire was already waiting for me. In addition to being my liaison, it seems that he's also being my escort and guide, I've been seeing Ergnade and accompanying him together every day.

"Good morning to you, Ergnade-sama. Permission to observe, is it."

"Yes. The earl was wondering if you would like to see how we train our soldiers here."

“I see, I’m thankful for his concern.”

After seven days, Ergnade’s chatting with me has become quite informal. The first day I arrived, he was addressing me with an overly stuffy, formal version of “you,” but some time ago he’s stopped that and is now calling me “you” casually like when he first visited Kaldia as a messenger.

He had sharp eyes, but they would soften at the corners and crinkle up as he watched me in silence. I got the same feeling from Ergnade’s grey eyes as I did from Margrave Molton back at the royal capital. It felt like I was getting cold from it, so I blinked and gently averted my gaze.

We left the tower I was staying at and headed for the dining hall, where Gunther was waiting for me. On the other side of this tower, my domain’s soldiers were borrowing rooms in the barracks here, while I had been given a room in what was known as the “knight building.” Since the “knight building” is supposed to be a living space for nobles, the commoner soldiers basically never come here. As one of my domain’s soldiers, Gunther followed those customs as well, and he was waiting for me in front of the door on the fourth floor that led to the knight building.

“Good morning, Gunther. Thanks for your troubles today as well.”

“Good morning to you, my lord, and Ergnade-sama.”

As Gunther replied to my greeting, he glanced behind me, and almost as an afterthought he greeted Ergnade as well. Ergnade was following behind me with a face that basically said of course he should be greeted as well. I always eat at the dining hall for soldiers, and haven’t been to the place where the earl’s sons, the senior knights eat. I can’t determine with absolute certainty if Ergnade really has been assigned as my “escort,” but for him to accompany me here to the regular dining hall probably does mean something of the sort along those lines.

“Good morning, Gunther-dono.”

Ergnade made a short response to Gunther’s greeting. Exchanging simple greetings like this has been going on every morning while Claudia is absent, as she was currently escorting the two women from Cyril village back to their homes.

After breakfast, Ergnade would help train me in using the spear. Since my usual instructor Claudia isn't here right now, at first I thought I'd get tips from Gunther again and have him watch over my training, but it seems that Ergnade must be bored just being my escort as he said he'd help me train as well. Since having a senior knight that's currently in active duty be my instructor is the best I could ask for, I bowed my head and accepted. Gunther's role has subsided to only overseeing my basic physical fitness and foundational training.

The spear skills that Ergnade was teaching me seemed to be a better fit for me, as Claudia's spear skills were highly technical, and were not a good fit for me as I was still a child lacking in body strength. Ergnade noticed this, and using Claudia's spear skills as a foundation, he trained me in spear skills that would be more fitting for me, especially as I might be using a spear on real opponents soon, unlike when I was training with Claudia. He emphasized attacking points that would cause the greatest amount of damage with my speartip.

Ergnade mentioned that Claudia's spear skills incorporated many elements from staff skills, and that these techniques had no wasteful movements to them and could definitely kill opponents.

Usually Ergnade would bring two wooden spears out from the armory for our practice, but today he had taken out two unfamiliar weapons instead.

"Viscountess Kaldia, I'm going to teach you some new moves today."

"New moves?"

"Yes, I'm going to teach you about halberds."

Ergnade placed the weapons on the ground, and told me to take a closer look. Regular spears were made of wooden shafts with a sharpened cone-shaped metal head attached, as it was a shape designed to pierce armor with. It basically takes advantage of length to stab enemies with, designed so that even regular soldiers with no knowledge of martial arts can kill enemy soldiers. It's commonly used by infantry soldiers.

In comparison, the spear-like weapon Ergnade had brought out was a bit shorter in length. The halberd was a spear with an axe blade attached to the spear tip, with a somewhat triangular shape and a double-edged blade on both sides of the spear. One was real and the other one was wooden, probably for practice purposes.

“Although it’s a bit difficult to use, but it’s a strong weapon once mastered. I’ve heard that the Kaldia army is mostly cavalry troops. Since this weapon works well both on horseback and on the ground, I think it’ll be good to learn.”

I see, I nodded as I passed the wooden halberd to him. It’s heavier as it comes equipped with an axe blade. What’s more, it shook a bit in my hands as gravity tugged down on its weight.

“……It’s almost lunchtime, so let’s end here.”

I had already become tired to the point where I didn’t have the energy to speak up when Ergnade finally said that, but he barely seemed to be sweating even though it was summer and he seemed refreshed. I had to use muscles that I didn’t normally use in order to just control this new weapon, and just holding it without shaking used up so much of my energy.

As I tried to catch my breath somehow, just like Ergnade said, I heard a gong…… sound from the bell that indicated it was now noon

Chapter 41
The black iron fortress, Part 2

After I was able to get some rest and had lunch, Ergnade asked me if I wanted to go see the training grounds now. That's when I remembered his comment earlier this morning. Come to think of it, it seems that Earl Einsbark had given me permission to observe their training.

Currently, the Kaldia domain soldiers are also receiving training from the soldiers at Fort Jugfena. It's so that I, Gunther, Earl Einsbark, and the soldiers can all work together better with each other, and we're all getting as much training as possible before the Densel soldiers draw closer.

In the southernmost part of Fort Jugfena, there was a building that was almost like a giant box which was the training grounds for the knights and soldiers. Since I've been receiving my training in the open grounds, I haven't been there before.

"……Even though I didn't even request it, the fact that Earl Einsbark has given me permission to see the training grounds, is it because he wants me to see how my soldiers are doing?"

"Of course, that would be correct."

When I tentatively asked Ergnade to see if I could receive confirmation, he nodded without any hesitation. Gunther had a bemused expression on his face as he usually didn't see much of the roundabout way of conversation between nobles.

"Then, I suppose I'll have to go take a look."

I felt like it would only be disadvantageous if I said I wouldn't go, while Ergnade smiled ambiguously at my reply. It was as if he was smiling at a child making progress, or maybe it's just a smile he directs at all children. I gently shook my head and ignored his smile, let's end this topic here.

The black iron fortress's training ground was much more overwhelmingly rugged than I expected. I wonder if that's why Ergnade went to the trouble of showing it to me from the ground up. Since I haven't really gotten close to here before, this is the first time that I'm seeing the imposing profoundness of this box-like structure up close. This place is much taller than the four towers located in the corners of the fort, and I couldn't help but raise my head and look at the ceiling, which caused me to almost trip and fall.

"Uh oh. Please be careful."

Ergnade had placed his hand on my back, supporting me, otherwise I would have hit my head against the stone floor.

"……I've shown you something unsightly."

Because I'd forgotten that I still had a child's body, I made a fool of myself just now. Embarrassment was easy to see from the expression on my face, and as if in response, Ergnade just grinned. I wonder if he's having fun at my expense…… as I thought about it, I got more and more embarrassed. Gunther didn't say anything and just looked at me with a half smile as well.

Although the training ground was lit up by lights inside, it was still dimmer than outside. It was built similar to an arena, and down in the center, soldiers were repeatedly practicing deploying in formations.

My domain's soldiers were wearing something metal on their hands, shins, and heads. It seems that it's equipment from twenty years ago that the fort had on hand that's been passed on to them as a gift to my troops, since nobody is using it now.

In order to improve the quality of my domain's troops, metal equipment will be required. It might be fine for them to use donated old equipment for the time being, but in order to maintain a cavalry squad in the future, the Kaldia domain is going to have to learn metal processing as well as deal with the increased maintenance costs.

I'm going to have to attract a skilled blacksmith to my domain as early as possible. However, right now making sure that public order remains stable after accepting so many refugees as new citizens is a more pressing matter.

"Viscountess Kaldia, what kinds of difficult things are you thinking about?"

I heard Ergnade's voice, snapping me back to my senses, as he had already finished descending the stairs and was in the center of the training ground. Gunther was also staring at me in amazement.

"You seemed to be looking so seriously at the soldiers, almost like you were glaring…… Do you think the training is insufficient?"

"N, no. That wasn't it."

While inspecting their equipment, I had gotten sidetracked thinking about my own domain. I hurriedly shook my head and denied to him that I would think the training insufficient, while Ergnade merely tilted his head and remained silent.

"It, it's…… because their movements have gotten so much better. I was wondering what type of training they'd gone through in order to polish their skills so much in so short a time."

"Didn't you come here to learn that? Let's go, come on."

Ergnade waved at me with a soft, wry smile. At the way he seemed, it triggered a vague memory in my brain. Although I wondered what it was, no matter how I parsed my memories, I couldn't remember what it was.

As Ergnade held his hand out for me as I descended the stairs, ahh, I've seen something similar to this scene in my previous life, is what I realized. My previous life's memories seem so far away now, I felt a fleeting sense of loneliness.

Before I realized it, my observation turned into training me on how to command, which continued until dinner time. Just like this morning, I was exhausted from everything, to the point where I felt like my head was spinning around when I finally was able to have dinner.

"Oi oi, you alright there, my lord?"

Gunther sitting next to me had a worried face as he shook me. I just sat there in a daze for a moment, until I finally noticed him and replied "I'm alright," and nodded slowly. It felt too tiring to talk very much.

"……It doesn't seem like you're alright."

Although he seemed relieved that I finally responded, he still didn't seem to believe me probably due to the look on my face, and he pinched my cheeks. Stop it, I slapped his hand away, and he dropped his hand away from me.

"I'm tired, can't you leave me alone……"

"Well, that's obvious to see. Can you still walk to your bed? You look like you're about to fall asleep on your feet."

"If she can't move, then I'll carry her there. No need to worry, Gunther-dono."

Ergnade who was eating on my other side elegantly wiped his mouth with a napkin as he interjected himself into our conversation. I was starting to nod off at that point, and stopped paying attention to what Gunther and Ergnade were talking about anymore. While dazedly looking at their worried faces as they kept talking, I thought back to the memory that Ergnade triggered in me back at the training ground.

"……Ah, mom and dad."

It reminded me of my parents from my previous life, and I accidentally said it out loud.

Gunther and Ergnade's surprised faces was the last thing I saw as I lost my consciousness. I'm at my limit.

Falling asleep for the first time in this world in this manner, I could hear panicky voices around me, it felt like I was hearing both wonder and satisfaction.

Chapter 42
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Prologue

One morning, I didn't hear the familiar low tolling sound of the bell. Kan, kan, I heard a high-pitched sound of metal being struck, and the sound was gradually increasing in volume. It was a daunting sound that enhanced tension, is what I thought. It must be a type of warning to inform us about something approaching.

When I opened my eyes, it was still dark inside my room. Outside the window, it was still a blurry dark blue sky. It's before dawn. The metallic sound was increasing in momentum, rather than stopping. I got off my bed with a buzzing sound inside me.

Just as I had taken off my nightclothes and was putting on my tunic, there was a hasty sounding knock on my door. Rather than a polite knock, it sounded much duller, almost like someone was swinging their fist against the door. It was the first time I've heard such a knock, I couldn't help but gulp.

"Viscountess Kaldia, it's me, Ergnade! Please open the door immediately if you're dressed!"

Ergnade who was usually calm was shouting anxiously from the other side of the door. It's someone I know, but I only felt slightly relieved.

"I'll be right there!"

As I hurriedly finished putting on my tunic and removed the bar from the door, Ergnade entered with great momentum. Even with the light from the torches in the corridor, it was still rather hazy inside my room.

"Listen, it's the Densel army. On the other side of the Great Plains, the Densel army has made their camp!"

"!!"

At the news of the Densel army making camp, I was so surprised that even though I knew it wouldn't be visible from here, I couldn't help but look out the window. On the other side of this fort's walls, was the flat, wide Great Plains. I could only vaguely make it out.

"The draconis here detected their scents. We'll be sending out a reconnaissance unit once it's sunrise, and prepare for battle. Where's your battle gear?"

As he was saying so, Ergnade rummaged through my room without my permission. In a box in the corner of the room, Ergnade found what he just asked, as he went through all its contents.

"This it? ……Alright, put it on. Let's get going right away, Earl Einsbark is waiting for you."

As I nodded, I felt like I was having an out of body experience. There was a tense feeling in my stomach, and my voice felt like it was stuck in my throat. By the time that I finally understood the situation and got ahold of myself, Ergnade was carrying me off in the opposite direction from where we usually went with large strides.

There's still quite some time before it's dawn. The golden sun was just barely beginning to peek out from the direction of the Monster Forest, when Ergnade and I arrived at a room in the fort. It was a room that was sparsely decorated, just like the iron windows in it.

"Has she arrived?"

"Yes, she's here with me."

Ergnade let me off, and I staggered a few steps. Because I had been shaken a bit, I felt slightly dizzy still.

"……Are you alright, Viscountess Kaldia?"

"Y, yes. I'm fine."

Now that I no longer feel like I'm being spun around, I had no problem standing properly and bowing neatly. Earl Einsbark nodded as he seemed to check over my

appearance, and motioned for me to take a seat over on the sofa. Ergnade and I both sat down across from Earl Einsbark. There was a table in between us, on which a map of the surrounding territory was spread.

On the map, to the east of Fort Jugfena, in the middle of the Great Plains, there were toys that probably represented the enemy soldiers placed there. Also, there were pieces representing enemy forces to the north, in the Bandishia Plateau as well, although their intentions were currently unknown. This is probably about the Densel army unit that's chasing the Shiru tribe.

"We sent out a reconnaissance unit the moment that the draconis detected the Densel army's presence, but currently we only know that they've made camp there and are unsure of their exact numbers."

There was a tiny toy piece in Earl Einsbark's hand. He placed it next to the pieces on the Great Plain. It seems to represent the scout unit he sent out.

"The draconis were unexpectedly helpful in locating them this early."

Bastards, muttered Ergnade under his breath.

As I looked at the pieces on the map, I was impressed with how everything was. In the name of chasing down the rebel Shiru tribe, they've made camp all the way here and pincered them. To chase less than 50 members of a nomadic tribe here, it's such a grand undertaking. Even Earl Einsbark seemed daunted.

At the very minimum, it seems there's at least 300 soldiers chasing the Shiru tribe. For any more troops than that to be deployed here and camping right next to our borders, it would be quite daring of them, basically an outright declaration of war.

Since the draconis were able to detect them, we were able to be on guard. So this represents the Densel army, I felt a terribly cold feeling as I stared at the pieces representing them.

"……It seems like the sun is up now."

Earl Einsbark happened to look out the window and made that comment. Just at that moment, someone knocked on the door to the room, and a knight entered after he was granted permission.

“Reporting in, the scout unit has returned! The Densel army numbers about 700, and it seems that they have siege engines in their camp!”

“Unbelievable, does Densel really intend to declare war on our country!?”

Ergnade stood up and shouted in anger. I looked at the map again. If Rindarl didn’t unite together, there was no way that Densel alone would have declared war on Arxia. As I thought about what it probably meant, I looked up and saw Earl Einsbark looking at me as if he was seeing something interesting.

In the blink of an eye, he changed his focus away from me, and the earl stood up.

“Tell Volmar to have the soldiers lined up in front of the fort’s walls.”

His voice was quite severe. I couldn’t help but straighten my back.

“Yes!”

The soldier bowed and exited the room. A moment of silence filled the room.

“Viscountess Kaldia, prepare yourself and head to in front of the fort’s walls with Ergnade. If you have anything to tell me about your army first, I’ll listen to it now.”

“There’s nothing.”

Earl Einsbark nodded once, sighed heavily, and left the room.

War is now imminent, a stone’s throw away from becoming reality. Although I was tense to the point of clutching my fists, I felt no elation at all, nor did I feel anything like fear yet. As I confirmed to myself how surprisingly calm I was, I nodded to myself.

– At last, this day has come. It finally happened on the morning of the 21st day since I’ve come to Fort Jugfena.

Chapter 43
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 1

The soldiers lined up in front of the fort walls silently checked their own equipment. Among the feeling of heavy tension, I kept staring at a map in my hands of the surrounding territory.

The role given to the Kaldia army in the upcoming battle on the plains was defending the left wing formation, and to guide the Shiru tribe back to the fort safely before their pursuers arrived. The left wing formation consists mostly of a dense formation of spear infantry, and their main role was to ambush the Shiru tribe's pursuers. In addition, a cavalry unit would head eastward through the Amon Nor Mountains towards the Bandishia plateau. It's to help, and guide the Shiru tribe. They've been included in the refugees that we've decided to accept. For that reason, we have to go to the trouble of guiding them.

The refugees currently at the fort are farmers, and also culturally similar to what's considered normal in Arxia. If I can acquire the refugees' leaders, the Shiru tribe, safely without incident, they'll become indebted to me for shielding them from the pursuit of Densel which represents the Rindarl Union.

In the name of protecting the refugees from persecution, the House of Lords has decreed that Arxia shall defend our fellow believers of the Ar Xia faith, and save any fellow believers that are under attack from other countries.

Because he knows that very well, that's why Earl Einsbark issued the order for the troops to move out.

I thought it was unlikely that Densel would have expected us to shield and come to the aid of the Shiru tribe, but judging from the amount of troops they have, there's no way they would have prepared so many troops just to chase the Shiru tribe. It's made rather obvious since there's no way they would need siege weapons to deal with the Shiru tribe. What's more, they even have the Shiru tribe right in front of them and pincered.

“My lord, here, your sword.”

I didn’t realize that someone was next to me, I raised my face in response when I heard myself being called in a soft voice. When I looked up, I saw Gunther holding a shortsword out to me.

“……Oh, uhhh. My bad, Gunther.”

I hurriedly received the sword from him, folded up my map and put it away in my waist pouch. I sheathed the shortsword and attached it to my belt. Since I already had a spear prepared standing next to me, I had completely forgotten to equip myself with a sword as well. I must have been too nervous.

Although there will be actual military operations going on, this time the main role of the Kaldia army isn’t primarily focused on combat. But even so, the situation could always change at any time on the battlefield, and both for self-defense and to lead my army, I need a sword. I mounted my horse and began directing my troops with the sword as we marched.

“Oh ho, you’re in the regular battle garb for nobles. When on my lord, it’s quite something to see.”

“Since you’re a soldier, this must seem like a mockery to you.”’

“I think all this looks just fine on my lord.”

Gunther was being even more overly familiar and jokingly bantering with me than usual, I realized it myself and felt how out of character it was. ……I’m about to be on a battlefield. When that thought came to my mind, my heart that had remained calm up until now starting suddenly beating fast. In order to slow down my rapid heartbeats, I consciously took deep breaths.

“Sorry, Gunther.”

“……About what. If it’s about the sword, I already heard it.”

This is my first battle with me leading my army. Since I’m their leader, I can’t allow myself to stiffen up and be overcome with tension. I should be thankful to Gunther for overstepping the boundaries between us with his daring words. It was good for relieving the tension, and taking my mind off that I was going into battle.

And so I just kept watching Gunther's back as he left my side and returned to leading the marching troops. He's really someone that doesn't spoil or go easy on me at all…… Indeed, for the domain lord who's just a child to not flinch on the battlefield, it's probably something necessary.

In the meantime, I heard a voice order "Form columns!" and the soldiers from Fort Jugfena who were all equipped for battle organized themselves standing neatly, making clanking sounds.

"Are all preparations ready?"

Volmar who was in front of the troops, glanced around at everyone as he raised his voice. Even though his voice wasn't overly loud, it carried well, just like his father Earl Einsbark's voice.

All the soldiers and knights saluted him.

He briefly informed the troops what I already knew, that the Densel army was right upon our doorstep, and to prepare for battle with the goal of protecting the Shiru tribe. When the soldiers responded affirmatively, Volmar stepped down, and in his place Wiegraf stepped forward.

"The infantry and cavalry are to create a camp outside the castle walls. The center formation shall consist of the 1st and 4th Cavalry Platoons, as well as Igor's squad, the right wing shall be the 2nd Cavalry Platoon and the rescue squad, while the left wing shall be the Franks squad and the Kaldia domain army. All archers shall man the castle walls. Averin squad, please take charge of the fort's defense and protection. The 3rd Cavalry Platoon is acting as a detached force and has already moved out."

The 3rd Cavalry Platoon that he just mentioned is probably the unit that's meant to guide the Shiru tribe. Not counting the archers and the single squad we're leaving behind to defend the fort, our battle strength is approximately 450 troops. While it's quite a difference to overcome compared to the enemy's 700 troops, it's not so unfavorable that we wouldn't be able to beat the Densel army.

"Listen up, our primary objective is the protection of the Shiru tribe, not the eradication or retreat of the Densel army."

The overall plan was to first march the army close to the Densel army's camp, both as a threat and to directly inquire as to the meaning of their advancing army. If battle is

unavoidable, the primary tactical objective is to be the destruction of their siege weapons.

The 3rd Cavalry Platoon is to be responsible for meeting up with the Shiru tribe, and the Kaldia army is to become a detached force as well to guard the Shiru tribe once that happens, and the knights and soldiers are to retreat and battle defensively when contact is made.

“A strategy based on retreating may be difficult to accept, but based on the situation I believe it’s not unreasonable. Don’t turn your backs on the enemy, and make absolutely certain to not break formation while retreating.”

As the strategist Wiegraf personally informed all soldiers of our battle strategy, I felt like I could feel all the soldiers holding their breaths.

– Come to think of it, Densel troops haven’t been so close to Fort Jugfena since the battle that occurred here seventeen years ago. Although I had learned that piece of military history from Mrs. Marshan, and Earl Terejia had hammered the neighboring country’s politics and aggressive stance against us into me, there had always been a part of me inside that had put it away in a corner of my mind until I confronted and confirmed it for myself. Fort Jugfena’s soldiers are well trained, and probably most of them are veterans that have experienced actual combat.

– But as for the Kaldia domain’s troops, it felt like there was a creeping sense of anxiety. More than half of my troops have never experienced actual battle before.

Chapter 44
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 2

Just like the neighboring countries, Arxia uses a conscription system to recruit soldiers, so most soldiers would originally be farmers that had only used hoes and plows up to now. In truth, the Kaldia army is mostly agricultural as well, as even the enlisted soldiers will have one month off each year to go back to their hometown and help with farming or the harvest, and they're also the ones in charge of growing wheat on the land under direct control.

That's why, it's not considered unusual for more than half of my soldiers to have never experienced actual battle.

I shook my head a little to dispel the anxiety that was threatening to invade me.

In my previous life, war had nothing to do with me, the concept of people killing each other on a battlefield had only seemed like a fantasy up until now. It's still getting through my head that this is all real, awareness is setting in that my current reality isn't quite so sweet.

I chewed lightly on the insides of my cheeks, and used the pain to discipline myself. Maybe it's because of the pain, it felt like I could organize my feelings faster than usual. I straightened my back as I rode my horse. Now that I was at an adult's eye level, I could see the knights clad in black on the other side of the soldiers.

"Eliza-dono!"

Among the soldiers trickling out through the castle gate, Ergnade came running up to me.

"Please be careful out there, Eliza-dono. I shall pray that the god Xia keeps you safe."

"You take care as well. Your role is probably more dangerous than mine."

After all, he's in the center formation. On top of that, if battle starts, his role is to attack and pierce the enemy formation. It's a much more dangerous job than mine.

Ergnade smiled softly, and stroked my hair without messing it up.

"I'm fine. I, and the people around me, we're all prepared for death. However, I have no intention of dying in such a small skirmish."

I didn't say anything else, and I just kept staring at his face, to the extent of burning it into my mind. He finally struck his chest, really forcefully.

"……Take care."

This moment finally stopped with great difficulty, and for a moment, Ergnade's smile seemed to get deeper as he left.

The soldiers quickly got into formation outside the fort's walls. It's to have the Densel army pay attention to us, is what our leader Earl Einsbark said to do. On the battlefield, the side with more information has the advantage. It seems that manipulating information so that the other side only knows what you want them to know is one of the basics.

"Everyone, advance!"

At Volmar's command, heavy drumbeats began sounding in a steady rhythm. In accordance with its beat, the soldiers advanced.

While being surrounded by soldiers, even though I knew it was out of place, I was impressed with the marching.

During my birthday celebration march, I had kept thinking that I wanted to do it like a marching band, and as expected, thanks to the drumbeats, it felt like the soldiers were able to march much more in unison with each other. Even though my army had also been training since they'd come here, it seems that they have no sense of rhythm at all. Because the terrain here is all flat, it's perfect for charging, and it probably won't be too hard to hear the drums within a 200 meter distance or so.

Before long, we arrived at the Densel army's campground. Their 700 troops were already lined up in a dense mass waiting for us.

"……?"

But the closer we approached to them, the more I felt that something was off. I squinted to try and see things better, and maybe my expression gave it away as well, Gunther who was standing next to me asked what was the matter.

"I don't know why, but…… Something seems strange about the enemy. It might just be my imagination."

"Ahh? ……Hang on a second."

Although I was unsure of what my feeling was, Gunther glared over at the enemy formation and thought for a moment in silence, then he suddenly raised his voice hurriedly.

"Oi, there's no horses in the enemy ranks. On top of that, most of their troops' heads seem to be fluttering in a funny manner."

When I heard that their heads were fluttering, the memory of a scarecrow from my previous life suddenly entered my mind. Whenever the wind blew against it, it would begin to flutter. What I thought next was, what a convenient thing to remember at this point in time.

"……This is probably a decoy."

"What? Who, who's the fastest in our army!"

When Gunther bellowed at the soldiers behind him, my army all stopped in surprise and shock. As the soldiers froze up and and had thinking expressions on their faces, one skinny arm rose up from among them.

"Yes! I'm quite confident in my speed and everyone says I'm the fastest!"

The one who stepped out from among the troops as he said so, was the soldier in training, Paulo, who had the role of leading my horse when we were on our way to Fort Jugfena.

“Alright, then I’m giving you an order. Head directly for the 1st Cavalry Platoon in the center formation, and give their leader Ergnade the message that ‘The enemy army seems strange. There’s no horses present, and the enemy soldiers look like props.’”

“What!? Sending someone like me as a messenger to the knights!?”

Paulo raised his voice and he was wide-eyed in surprise, but maybe it’s because he knows the urgency of the situation, he left immediately at top speed. Watching him go, I felt like he wasn’t bragging at all when he said that he was the fastest.

“What’s the matter, Viscountess Kaldia?”

It’s probably because they were wondering why the Kaldia army suddenly stopped marching, the vice captain of the Franks squad traveling with us in the left wing came over on horseback to inquire.

He’s a soldier that’s rather advanced in years with a white mustache and beard, and rather than fit, it could be said that he’s more plump.

“Something’s strange about the Densel army, I believe that it could be a decoy.”

There’s no horses, and the enemy soldiers’ heads were shaking unsteadily in the wind, much like scarecrows would. The vice captain listened to my explanation as he stroked his beard, but when I finished and requested that he report the situation to his captain, he began chuckling.

“What……”

When the vice captain started suddenly laughing despite the tense situation, Gunther was struck speechless. He kept laughing without regards to the tension.

“Viscountess Kaldia, you’re really such an adorable child. You remind me of my grandson.”

“Huh?”

The vice captain has gone off on a tangent that I don’t understand at all.

I couldn’t help but tilt my head in confusion, while the vice captain turned to Gunther and kept talking with a joyful expression on his face.

“When being mixed in with only adults in a place like this, children will usually want to say things that make them stand out. You don’t have to take them so seriously.”

What’s with this guy.

At his overly nonchalant attitude, Gunther and I were frozen in astonishment for quite a long time.

Chapter 45
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 3

"……If you have the time to make light of this situation, then hurry up and go report to your captain already."

Gunther finally managed to clear his throat and say something, I could easily tell that he was completely exasperated with and quite angry at the vice captain.

The white-bearded vice captain only tilted his head slightly, and without saying anything, rode his horse unhurriedly back to his squad. Although he did stop by the squad captain to say something, judging by their behavior it seems that they won't be taking my orders.

I had ordered the vice captain to report on my analysis of the situation to his captain. Although I don't have a specific position at Fort Jugfena, I'm still an Arxian noble, no matter if this is Fort Jugfena or even Densel land.

"……My lord, when we return to the fort, shall I submit a formal complaint against that senile old geezer?"

"Do as you like."

It was incredibly easy to see that Gunther was in a very foul mood due to what had just happened. I thought back to the time last year when I had just arrived at the barracks under Gunther's care. ……I was someone he wanted to kill. In a turn of events, he's now serving right beside me and protecting me. I can't even begin to describe just how much people's hearts can change.

– Maybe, if I had given them a chance, they could have become good people as well. The family that I killed.

I decided to get rid of the idea that they could possibly have changed, and seal the thought away in my mind. I had already decided long ago that it wouldn't happen, when I made the decision to get rid of them.

……Besides, now's not the time to think about such things. Even though I was clenching my teeth, I noticed a rumbling sound that didn't seem like it was caused by my teeth grinding.

"……Gunther, do you hear something?"

"What is it this time? I'm not as young as my lord is, my eyes and ears aren't as good as yours……"

He's still in his upper twenties, and he's already claiming age…… But even so, he concentrated on listening for sounds without saying anything else.

"……Is this the sound of horse hooves?"

"Can you tell what direction it's coming from, Gunther?"

"How would I know, do you think I'm a beast or something, you stupid brat?"

I'll ignore for now the fact that Gunther slipped back to his old foul-mouthed habits, given the situation at hand. It's not like I have anyone else that would take orders from me. But anyways, it seems that he's finally lost his patience with me because he thought I was treating him like he had the senses of a beast, and he's gone back to his more familiar way of talking to me. Although we've been together quite a long time as he's been both my teacher and my subordinate, I never would have thought that I'd be learning more about his personality in such a time and location.

"If it was Claudia, I think it would be easy for her."

"Don't lump me together with that little girl."

Well, that's true, I nodded in acknowledgement, and kept listening for sounds. The rumbling sounds were getting closer to us, and now I could tell for certain that it was definitely the sound of horse hooves. But, I couldn't really tell what direction the sounds were coming from.

"My lord-!"

Suddenly, Paulo came running back, having returned after I sent him off as a messenger to the central formation. Even though he's only a soldier in training, he seems to be quite fit, as he's not even short of breath.

“You’re really so fast.”

“Thank you for the compliment. Um, Ergnade-sama said that he would like for my lord to come see him personally in the center formation.”

At hearing Paulo’s message from Ergnade, I furrowed my eyebrows. He wants me to leave my army for the time being?

“……Got it, I’ll go.”

Well, if he wants me to come to him then I must go. His rank here at the fort, and on the battlefield, is higher than mine. The fastest method is for me to go there by myself on horseback.

“Gunther, take command for the time being. Paulo, get on and ride behind me. I’m going to take you along as a messenger soldier.”

“Whawhat, me ride my lord’s horse?”

“Hurry up already.”

Paulo is one of the soldiers in training to become a cavalry soldier in the future. There’s no way that he’d have been allowed to lead my horse previously otherwise.

He still seemed lost so I glared at him, and he finally hurriedly but smoothly jumped on behind me.

There seems to be a state of confusion in the center formation, the soldiers all seemed to be terribly nervous about something. The atmosphere was even heavier than when we were departing from the fort.

“Ergnade-sama, I heard that you called for me?”

“Ahh, Viscountess Kaldia. I’m glad that you came over immediately.”

He brought his horse next to mine, and with an excuse me, he suddenly picked me up and plopped me on his horse. I was shocked at what he was suddenly doing, but from

above my head, I heard him saying in a tiny voice that this was so information wouldn't leak.

Paulo suddenly had his hands full, controlling my horse by himself. He looked like how I did before my birthday celebration, all nervous on the horse.

"Sorry about that."

"It's nothing, anyways, what did you want to say?"

"The right wing has changed direction, and is now proceeding to deploy southwest. Just earlier we heard the sound of many horse hooves. There must be a large group of cavalry troops nearby. When I received your report, I wondered if the Densel army was up to a daring plan of some sort."

We had headed directly east from Fort Jugfena to get here, so to be deploying our right wing southwest from here means that he's worried about the enemy army invading our country from south of here. The elevation gets lower around here as it gets farther south. Because it can get quite sloped in certain areas, it may be quite difficult to find the Densel army immediately if they did take such a southern route. If the Densel army really has slipped west of us, the southern route is the most likely way they took.

Although we left some troops to defend Fort Jugfena and there's the moat and gate, if they sent their full forces they could definitely overcome it. Even the soldiers that are usually on lookout are participating in the expedition today, the military presence currently at the fort is minimal.

However, to take the southern route to the fort, they would also have to go through the Monster Forest filled with all sorts of magical beasts. That's why we hadn't been on guard for them taking the southern route.

To safely go through that forest, it's estimated that at least ten thousand soldiers would have been required.

Chapter 46
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 4

"I can't get a good read on the enemy's intentions. I think the Densel army must have realized that we left Fort Jugfena…… But as for where they went after departing from their camp and leaving decoy scarecrows behind……"

"Indeed, it feels like they're plotting something."

In fact, I can't think that it could be anything other than some sort of trap. We chatted while trying to get a good look at the Great Plains where their camp was, and Ergnade agreed with me that it could be some sort of trap.

"……I'll command the knights and go inspect their camp. Everyone else, be on standby here."

"Isn't it dangerous to be doing nothing here while we still don't know the enemy's intention?"

"That's indeed the case, but we're currently at the Great Plains with a wide view of everything around us. It should still be safe to just approach the enemy camp. You should return now to the left wing formation, and proceed with the original plan of having your domain's army be in charge of protecting the Shiru tribe from any attackers on their tail once they are located. Could I ask you to relay the current situation to the Franks squad captain as well?"

When I heard him mention the Franks squad, bitter feelings towards the vice captain of the Franks squad surged up within me as I recalled my recent encounter with him. There's no point in passing along any messages to someone that won't listen to you.

……Him ignoring my orders in that situation, is a serious offense that will have to be taken care of when all of this is over. At the very least, he can be charged with disrespect towards a noble, I wonder if that white-bearded vice captain will still be able to retain his position at the fort after that.

“I understand.”

I swallowed down my feelings and nodded. Then, I suddenly felt like I was floating again as Ergnade picked me up once more.

“Good girl. Take care of yourself.”

He whispered that to me in a very kindly manner as he dropped me off back onto my horse. And so, once again I was now sitting in front of Paulo, the novice soldier, who had been struggling with controlling my horse by himself.

I hurriedly took the reins as my horse neighed and reared slightly. As I took control and had my horse start heading back, I took a peek back in Ergnade’s direction.

He was nowhere to be seen already.

I headed for the Franks squad’s vanguard. Since the center formation’s troops had stopped moving, it seems like the other wings’ troops were slightly confused as to what was going on.

“Is the Franks squad captain here?”

Their vice captain had just come over to my army earlier, so I figured that their captain would most likely be leading their vanguard, but once again it was the white-bearded vice captain that came up to greet me. The vice captain smiled at me, and asked, “what’s the matter?”

“It’s an order from Ergnade-sama, to stop marching your troops. The entire army is to be on standby for the time being. Anyways, where’s the captain?”

“If you’re asking for the captain, he just headed over to the Kaldia army.”

“Wha?”

Because I heard something so unexpected, I couldn’t help but respond in an embarrassing fashion. What exactly would the Franks squad captain want with my army?

I saw a glimmer of malice in the vice captain's smile.

"Just earlier, our captain noticed Viscountess Kaldia heading off somewhere. Since we can't have an army without a commander, the captain headed over there to be the acting commander in your place. After all, it's quite well-known that the Kaldia army is such a low grade, disorganized army that it doesn't even have military ranks."

"……"

With a child as his opponent, he was gleefully saying such base things with clear malice, not even trying to hide his intentions. Faced with his vileness, I could only feel that I don't want to deal with him for any longer than I have to.

"I think our army's definitely a grade above from being under incompetent leadership that can't even accurately assess the situation on a battlefield."

Paulo who was sitting behind me suddenly butted in with his comment. It was really sudden and he said it quite forcefully.

The white-bearded vice captain's detestable smile finally disappeared.

"What……?"

"Underestimating someone just because she's a child, having a dumb brain, and the bad taste of making fun of nobility, I think it's wonderful that there's nobody like you in the Kaldia army."

The things I wanted to say to the vice captain, Paulo said for me without worrying about any consequences, cheering me up greatly. It might be that he's too tense from the possibility of encountering battle for the first time and he's forgotten his place.

I didn't feel like accompanying the vice captain whose face was turning red for any longer, and I turned my horse around to leave. As my horse started galloping, it was a simple matter to put a lot of distance between me and the vice captain in a short amount of time.

The vice captain, who had been quite slow to react, raised his arm up for some reason, which I didn't see. Well, I would have been too annoyed to consider thinking about what he could have meant with that anyways.

Well then, I wonder what my army's been doing. According to the vice captain, his captain should be with my army currently. I wonder what kind of person the captain will be, why don't I see for myself.

"I'm really so sorry, I arbitrarily interrupted my lord in the middle of your conversation."

As we left the Franks squad, Paulo sitting behind me apologized for his rudeness. Since I had found what he was saying hilarious, it had completely removed all my tension.

"It's fine. I was feeling like my ears were getting dirty just from listening to his filth."

As we continued on our way, Paulo laughed raucously.

"So that's what my lord was thinking. As I thought, you seem even more mature than I am."

When I returned to my army, my army was marching onwards, while I could hear Gunther angrily bellowing at someone.

"Like I said, don't just selfishly decide on your own to take charge! Viscountess Kaldia personally said that I could take command here!"

"What's the fuss about, Gunther?"

As I covered my ears slightly to shield them from Gunther's powerful shouting, I called out to Gunther.

"……Oh, ahh, my lord. Perfect timing. Could you get rid of this guy?"

When Gunther turned around and looked at me, I could see that he had a really frustrated expression. Since Gunther reaches boiling point quite easily and is prone to using his fists when he gets angry, he's really showing quite a lot of self restraint. It must be because of the rank of who he's dealing with.

"Ahh, Viscountess Kaldia. I see that you've returned, welcome back."

Standing next to a frowning Gunther was someone who spoke up in an overly cheerful voice that seemed terribly out of place on the battlefield. Looking up at him, I saw a middle-aged, well-built man with a face that reminded me of a reptile's. He must be the captain of the Franks squad.

"……Gunther, there's an order from Ergnade-sama to have the troops stop marching. The entire army is to be on standby."

I ignored the flowery language from the captain and directly gave Gunther an order instead, and Gunther sighed, saying finally as he took out his sword and raised it to give his orders. The captain's eyeballs were moving about in all directions as he watched us.

"Stop the marching!"

All my soldiers immediately stopped marching. After all, the Kaldia army is quite small. One of the benefits though, is that commanding them is quite simple.

The captain who had come here on the pretext of taking command because of the lack of command ability in the Kaldia army, had quite a bored expression on his face as he watched us.

Chapter 47
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 5

Maybe it's because Paulo knew how tainted I felt from having to deal with the vice captain, he spoke up for me and told the captain "I think you can go back now."

"There's a message from Ergnade-sama for you. The knights will be taking charge of scouting the enemy camp, and the rest of the army is to remain on standby. We're still to meet up with the Shiru tribe and make sure to protect them, but since we don't know when we'll meet up, we're to be on guard."

"That's what's going on?" was the captain's response, and he hurriedly went back towards his own Franks squad after taking a good look in their direction. Half of his squad had already stopped marching due to receiving the order from the center formation and seemed to be looking over here at us, while the other half was still marching onwards.

"……Before making comments about command ability in other armies, learn how to manage your own squad."

Gunther insulted the captain while I watched silently as he drew a line across his neck with his thumb, as the captain was running off, shouting "stop marching, you idiots!"

"Well, that's how it is."

Gunther shrugged and turned around, and we headed back for our army that was lined up in neat and orderly lines. Originally though, we had expected that battle should have begun already at this point in time. It's just a question of when we're going to meet up with the Shiru tribe.

We remained on guard at our current location for approximately one hour. Nothing had happened during that time and the plains were eerily silent, when we finally heard something abuzz from behind us.

“What’s going on?”

Gunther raised his voice, trying to figure out exactly what was happening. A soldier from the farthest column behind us answered him.

“My lord! There’s clouds of dust rising from behind us!”

At that same moment, I could hear what sounded like battle cries from the center formation’s army. Is it an enemy attack? It couldn’t be, from behind us?

“My lord, please look at that!”

Paulo grabbed my shoulder. When I looked in the direction he was pointing, what I saw was black smoke rising from one of the tents in the back of the enemy camp.

“……Fire?”

I didn’t have a chance to think about it for long. Gunther was already raising his voice again.

“Oi, they’re coming here!”

The soldiers immediately stopped making a fuss, which was replaced by a feeling of high tension instead. Northeast of us, horses were kicking up quite a lot of dust. The soldiers in front of the horses had the flag of Fort Jugfena.

“Raise our flags!!!”

It was the 3rd Cavalry Platoon whose role was to guide the Shiru tribe here that was approaching us rapidly, and my army raised their flags as well. From our side, I heard “take your positions!” as well. The Franks squad was hurriedly fixing their crooked formation, and organizing themselves into a dense formation of spear infantry.

The Shiru tribe and the 3rd Cavalry Platoon which consisted of knighted nobility were approaching us without reducing their speed at all. From what I could see, there were many men running on foot, followed by children on horseback. There were two to three children on each horse. One of their leaders who was holding a flag stopped in front of me, and asked, “would you happen to be Viscountess Kaldia?” I nodded saying I was, and he saluted me and began giving me a concise report of what happened with the detached force.

“About the Shiru tribe, there’s overwhelmingly many more of them than we expected. They are the remnants of the Shiru tribe that helped their women escape to Fort Jugfena first and were left behind at the Bandishia Plateau. Their men are letting the remaining women and children use their horses, and their warriors are running alongside our 3rd Cavalry Platoon.”

“I understand.”

While we were talking, the horses with children on them started passing by me as well, and with bustling noises and metallic clanging, women soon followed. Behind them were armed knights, probably to protect them as a rearguard.

“Our current situation here is that I’m afraid we may have fallen for Densel’s trap. The Densel army seems to have gone around ours and taken the southern route. Since I just heard battle cries from the center formation, it could be that they’re already engaged in battle.”

“Then, let us retreat back to the fortress by way of the Bandishia Plateau. Please leave leading the way up to me.”

Since that’s what I wanted to do as well, I nodded immediately in agreement with him. That’s when a man from the Shiru tribe who was on horseback came riding up in front of us. Although he had a bow in his hands, I noticed that his quiver was empty.

“Oi, the last of us, those with no weapons, have all arrived now! What are we supposed to do now!?”

He spoke fluent Artolan language. The only people who understood him were me and the knight though, Gunther and Paulo just looked at each other blankly.

“We’re going back to our fort by way of the Bandishia Plateau! Since fighting has already broken out on the plains, we’re going to avoid that path!”

As the knight answered, I saw an arrow flying in our direction from far behind us. I could hear vivid sounds of roaring and screaming. The pursuing Densel soldiers are close by. After the Shiru nomad who had used up all his arrows, injured stragglers kept trickling by us one by one. They smelled of blood and dirt.

“Let’s go. It’s time to head for Fort Jugfena.”

“I understand. Viscountess Kaldia, please lead your army.”

I’m strongly worried about leaving the rearguard duties up to the Franks squad, but we can’t afford to stay here a moment longer. I mimicked Paulo and smoothly jumped up onto my horse, and took its reins.

“Kaldia army, prepare to withdraw! Withdraw!”

Many soldiers passed by my side, with their swords and spears at the ready. Among them were also some male Shiru tribe warriors on foot, having ceded their horses to their women and children.

“We’re going to return to Fort Jugfena by way of the Bandishia Plateau! Begin marching!!”

As my troops were withdrawing, the Franks squad was advancing. With metallic clanging sounds in the air, combined with horses neighing and people screaming, I could hear clashing sounds as we withdrew from our current location.

Chapter 48
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 6

The exhausted Shiru tribe were about 100 in number, and every one of them was trying their hardest to go as fast as they could despite their condition. Those that couldn't run anymore would change places with those on horses, everyone was lending each other hands and shoulders for support, and with the 3rd Cavalry Platoon leading the way, we hurried back towards Fort Jugfena.

Since we were mostly going uphill, people were reaching their limits. But even so, we couldn't afford to slow down, because we could hear the sounds of battle from right behind us, scaring people onwards.

Turning around to look, I could see the forces from Fort Jugfena fighting with the Densel army. Since they were battling at a lower elevation from us, I could see the whole situation quite clearly. The Densel army had indeed attacked from an unexpected direction, so the two armies' positions were reversed. The Densel army was in between Fort Jugfena and our forces, coming under attack from archer fire, while our forces were between the Densel army and their camp where the tents had been set on fire. With both armies trapped between a rock and a hard place, having nowhere to run, it seems that it's quite likely that it'll develop into a scene of brutal carnage.

I couldn't help but squint to get a closer look at the battlefield. Even though it was still fairly far away and it would be almost impossible to find someone specific, I couldn't help but look among the chaos for a speck of black.

"We're almost there, everyone please keep doing your best."

Suddenly, one of the knights who had remained silent up until now suddenly gave some encouragement to the Shiru tribe. Although he was speaking the Arxian language instead of Artolan language, somehow his meaning seems to have been transmitted to them, and the Shiru tribe appeared to be relieved. It's probably because the enemies haven't been able to chase us up to here, and nobody has been saying anything until now, which gave them the sense of relief.

“It’s just a little more until we reach the fort. Let’s get there, then everyone can rest.”

I called out as well to a child who was shakily just holding on, and patted him on the shoulder to give him encouragement. He was riding on one of the Shiru tribe’s horses and appeared even younger than me. Although I was born as a noble, I’m unfortunately already used to the pace of a marching army.

Because we kept heading northeast, it was getting colder and colder. It’s because we’re getting closer to the Amon Nor Mountains. It’s a bit dark around here because the mountains are covered year round in snow clouds, giving it an eerie atmosphere. Even so, somehow the Shiru tribe quickened their pace.

We finally reached a cave on the mountainside. Without any hesitation, the knights headed straight inside. The Shiru tribe, and the Kaldia army as well, followed them.

It was dark inside the cave, and the air was stifling due to it being summer. It was still rather chilly though, and completely silent inside. Since several knights were vaguely lighting the way, we were able to at least see the direction to travel in. The lights the knights were using were probably light emitting stones created from the scales of the fire moths. They’re actually quite few and rare in number, and their effectiveness is about the same as the fire moths themselves. After traveling through the cave for a while, the knights paused in front of a stone door.

“Viscountess Kaldia, we’ve arrived at Fort Jugfena.”

A happy expression appeared on the knight that was walking in front of me. His relief was obvious to see.

“Wait a second, there’s no guards on the other side?”

The knight’s relieved expression disappeared instantly when another knight raised his voice.

“That’s probably because we’re currently in a wartime situation. Everyone is on lookout instead, also to prevent deserters as well. After all, it’s pretty easy to slip right across the border.”

“I see, so there was that as well?”

I was listening closely to the knights' conversation, but I wasn't quite convinced how that would be a good reason to leave this door unguarded. Since this hidden passage leads directly inside the fort, it seems too important to not leave a single guard here at all.

With an ominous feeling hanging over me, I spoke to the two knights that were having their conversation.

"An incident may have occurred here as well. I think it'll be good if we wait to ascertain the situation before having the Shiru tribe enter the fort."

The knights looked at each other, then they nodded at me.

"Alright, let's have the Shiru tribe rest for a little while here. Half of the 3rd Cavalry Platoon and half of the Kaldia army shall remain here to guard them, just in case. The rest shall check out the situation inside the fort."

"Understood."

I nodded in agreement with their plan, and one of the two knights came up close to me. He began speaking to me in a really hushed tone of voice.

"……Viscountess Kaldia, if it's alright with you, would you join us for going inside the fort? There's no guarantee that Densel soldiers won't discover this cave and chase us down. If that happens, with the Shiru tribe here, things may get quite chaotic. We have the responsibility of defending you from enemy soldiers, but that may be quite difficult if there's a chaotic situation."

The knight had a serious expression on his face, and I looked up at him straight in the face in return. He looked so strict, that I couldn't help but take a step back.

I nodded in agreement, and without changing his strict expression, the knight began the task of dividing people into who would go and who would remain here.

I let go of my breath, and loosened my stiff body. I had Gunther divide our army into two, and told him that we would be heading into the fort first to check the situation out, while the Shiru tribe got some rest.

"Alright, everything is ready, so let's go."

One of the knights raised his voice, and everyone who was selected to enter the fort lined up in front of the door. It took several people to open the heavy stone door, and it budged with creaking sounds, along with causing a warm wind to blow this way.

It was already dark before, and even after the stone door was opened it remained dark. While being surrounded by Gunther who was in charge of my personal protection and three other knights, I entered the fort, and we arrived at a large hall in the northernmost section of the fort. We came out of what had been disguised as an altar, covered with a gigantic tapestry embroidered with the Arxian national emblem.

"……It's too quiet."

Other than the sounds of our breathing, there was no other sound at all. I could clearly hear someone in my party gulping and swallowing their saliva, then it became completely silent again.

"Let's…… let's go upstairs. The archer squad should be there."

The knight leading us said so, and we began heading upstairs towards the nobles' building from the northern hall.

Chapter 49
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 7

The nobles' building in Fort Jugfena is farther north than the knight building I was currently staying at, it's where Earl Einsbark and his family usually live, and there's extra rooms for the occasional visiting noble as well. When the earl and his sons had treated me to a feast to welcome me here, the dining hall had been in this building as well.

On the first floor and the basement level of the nobles' building, there's also housing and rooms for the servants to use and work in. I had a room prepared for me in the knight building instead because my current bodyguard was Gunther who was a commoner, but for things like having my clothes washed, the servants would do that here.

Currently, everyone from the nobles' building should be in the basement. It seems that the basement's supposed to be the shelter in times of war.

Going through the completely empty nobles' building, we arrived at the tower connecting it with the knight building. It's a tower with a spiral staircase where no more than two people could possibly squeeze through at a time. It took a while for all of us to climb up, due to the lack of space. Maybe it's because everyone is worried, our pace was quite fast, almost like trotting. Well, for the adults it was like trotting, but for me I basically almost had to sprint.

The knight in front didn't even seem to consider the possibility that this place may have been attacked, and he knocked on a door at the top of the tower. Behind this door should have been Earl Einsbark, his son the military strategist Wiegraf, and the bow troops equipped with greatbows.

"……Oi, why's there no response!?"

The soldiers were beginning to hit the door, getting very worried. Just as we opened the door, we heard someone shouting "Einsbark-sama!!" in despair.

The knights hurriedly began moving out. Being caught in the flow, I was forced to go along with them.

Sunlight was reflecting down on red liquid spreading out from the bodies of men clad in metal armor that were all slumped down on the cold stone floor. The floor was drenched completely red, and the entire place had an unbearable stench caused by all the blood, despite this being the outside of the tower, on the tower's roof.

It all felt like it almost wasn't real.

I could hear faint sounds of groaning coming from here and there. There must be a few people barely clinging on to life.

When my Kaldia army followed the knights here and arrived, it seems that none of them managed to throw up at this scene. Everyone seemed tense, with their eyes burning at the terrible tragic scene in front of them.

There were about forty archers that had fallen down in their pools of blood here, and the knights in charge of Earl Einsbark's personal protection had fallen here as well. There were another thirty or so dead people that appeared to be enemy soldiers here, a trivial amount compared to their overall numbers.

My intuition tells me that they're Densel soldiers, because they aren't wearing the tunics common to this region. However, I couldn't see Earl Einsbark who should be dressed in black knightly attire, or his son Wiegraf anywhere.

"Einsbark-sama, he's not here! Einsbark-sama, Wiegraf-sama, where are you!!"

The members of the knights began desperately searching this area. Earl Einsbark also serves as the leader of all the knights. Of course the knights would look up to and respect him. Wiegraf is the strategist. He would come up with the battle strategy, and the knights would carry it out, their very lives depend on him. I feel like the knights must have a very strong sense of trust in them to be able to rely on each other so much.

While looking at this situation, the question of whether or not my own army would also desperately search for me like this popped into my mind. I don't think I've done anything deserving of respect, nor do I think I've established a foundation of trust with them.

My relationship with my soldiers is, I'm the daughter of someone they all hate, and I have to be on guard for them rebelling and killing me at any moment, since I don't think it would be strange at all for any of them to want to do that.

However – I think that dying by betrayal would be for the best. Even if I died, nobody would get worked up about me.

When I slowly blinked and looked back up at my surroundings, I saw an old archer leaning against the wall. The man laying on top of him had black hair with streaks of blue in it spilling out of his helmet.

And just like these two laying on top of each other, so many soldiers have lost their lives. But somehow, the more I looked at these two, the more I felt like they were positioned as if to protect them from something.

I wondered if it could possibly be, and I checked to make sure, they turned out to be Earl Einsbark and his son Wiegraf. They were both unconscious, but still breathing. I told the knights escorting me what I had noticed, and as they confirmed it for themselves, they sighed in relief.

"It, it's Earl Einsbark and his son Wiegraf-sama! They're still living!"

"What, really!? Where!!"

"Right here! He's disguised as an archer!!"

The knights were making a big fuss as they gathered around us. My army and I allowed them to have this place to themselves, and took a step back.

I turned to look at the wide Great Plains that could be seen from the fort. Just yesterday it had still been a lush green, filled with flowers, and after being trampled by people and horses today, there was hardly anything left worth seeing. Beyond that, I could see clouds of dust being raised in the distance. I could hear faint sounds of battle all the way from here, I wonder if it's because of the wind's direction. Or, I wonder if it's because everything is too quiet at Fort Jugfena. The archers should have been packed on top of the tower's roof as well, but not a single one of them was standing. They've probably all been defeated.

"Charlie, can I have a moment of your time?"

One of my soldiers called out to me. He was on the opposite side of the tower from me, looking at the direction of Arxia.

“What’s that……”

The soldier was pointing straight below him. What should have been there was the refugees’ tents.

However, what was there instead was an incredible amount of dead bodies stacked on top of each other. The very earth itself seemed to be stained red.

“How could this happen……”

I couldn’t help but speak that out loud. I could feel myself almost choking.

The refugees were people without any weapons or riches. Even so, the Densel soldiers killed all of them.

This is just a massacre. Rather than hoping to gain something from this war, I’m wondering if they came here just in search of people to slaughter.

I could feel my hand shaking against the cold stone wall.

Why did they kill them all. Was it all just for pleasure? I bit my lip as I tried to bear the brunt of what I was feeling.

A memory of red eyes flashed across my mind. I saw the cold yet beautiful face of my father with that ecstatic smile of his.

Chapter 50
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 8

I don't have the time right now to be distracted by my vivid memories of father and his crazy smile.

We were suddenly attacked.

On the other side of the tower we were on that connected the nobles' building and the knight building, the door to the tower that connected the knight building to the barracks was suddenly kicked open. With metallic clanging sounds, enemy soldiers drew their swords and came swarming like an avalanche, charging at the soldiers from my army closest to them.

"Dominic! Igor!"

Instantly, one of my soldiers had a fresh blood splatter down his back, while another one of my soldiers had a sword piercing through his stomach. My whole body felt like it was simultaneously flying into a hot-blooded rage, as well as trembling as if I was cold, bound by a strange feeling.

Before I realized it I was shouting out their names. The voice coming from my throat sounded more heartbreaking than I've ever heard it before.

"Richard, Wojciech!"

My soldiers were attacking the ambushers that had cut down Dominic and Igor. However, they were surrounded by a greater number of enemies, and Richard and Wojciech were pierced through by swords as well. With their eyes still wide open, both of them collapsed on the stone roof. I saw them convulsing limply with blood running out of their bodies, until someone's arm blocked my vision.

"My lord, please get down!"

The arm was Gunther's. Under his protection, we retreated back towards the nobles' building, and I put a hand on the hilt of my sword. Since overly long weapons would be useless indoors, I had left my halberd that Ergnade had taught me how to handle back in the mountain cave with the Shiru tribe.

Like the wind, the knights appeared from behind me to jump to my defense. They began cutting off enemy heads with their swords, and piercing them through their chests in return.

However, our assailants kept up their fierce attack. The assailants were equipped with slightly shorter swords than the average ones in Arxia, with extremely sharpened tips. It's basically a single-edged weapon, strong at piercing, and easy to wield due to how light it is.

It's become a chaotic melee on the fort's rooftop, with screams, death cries, and angry roars adding to the confusion. People on both sides were dying left and right, even falling off the fort's roof to the ground far down below.

At this ghastly scene, father's howling laugh from long ago echoed in the back of my head. I felt like I was seeing the hell that father had created all over again.

My knees were quivering, and my brain seemed completely numb.

"My lord, please escape!"

The moment that Gunther called out to me, an attacker came from my blind spot behind a pillar, flying at me. As I was jumping backwards, Gunther's sword was already blocking the attacker's sword. With the clashing sound of metal against metal, Gunther blew away his opponent completely. However, at the next moment another enemy was already attacking Gunther with a short spear.

"Gunther!"

I gulped. My body felt leaden. All I could hear was my father's howling laughter in the back of my head. With the metal equipment that Gunther received from Fort Jugfena, he successfully deflected the enemy's attack, then cut off the enemy's head with his sword.

"Get out of here already!"

He roared angrily at me with worry in his voice. His voice sprang my body into action, and I finally took a step.

The other knights charged with my protection were also fending off attackers coming from all directions. If even one of them falls it feels like we'll be overwhelmed, alarm bells were now ringing in my head. Turning around, I saw some knights retreating back into the nobles' building with the fainted Earl Einsbark and Wiegraf. One of them noticed my situation, and came running back over here with sword in hand.

"Hurry up and get out of here!"

At the same time that he was shouting at me, I was running there in a straight line as fast as I could.

From the side, I saw a type of gauntlet glove I've never seen before reach out, and slice the knight running over to me in half. Together with the knight's dying scream, blood splashed out on me in a long stream. My right ear was beating in pain from the loudness of his scream. Luckily at least blood didn't splash into my eyes. I used the inside of my sleeve to roughly wipe off the blood on my forehead.

I can't stop just because I got splashed with some warm liquid. I slowed my running slightly so that I could change direction at any time. For the first time ever, I cursed at how young and weak my body was still, feeling just how much of a difference there was in physical capabilities between me and the knights.

"Viscountess!!"

Someone was screaming for me. I jumped sideways because I saw a reflection of light in the edge of my field of vision.

Sure enough, I made a good decision. I heard the sound of cloth tearing, and felt myself being pulled slightly by the momentum of something passing by me. It seems that my cloak has been torn. My helmet fell off, making a banging sound against the floor. I still had my hand on the hilt of my sword.

I jumped up again without even taking a moment to catch my breath. Something heavy bounced off against the ground where my face had been just one second earlier. I didn't even dare to look back behind me, and kept running again.

However, at that moment I started choking. Someone was dragging me by my torn cloak. He lifted me up into the air by my cloak, choking me.

“Cough……”

I reflexively grabbed at the cloth around my neck with both hands feverishly. Even so, all I could do was swing helplessly in the air. Although I kept trying to scratch and kick the person holding on to me, it did nothing at all.

I was getting dizzy and my eyes couldn’t see anything. Together with my vision flickering, my whole body was shaking violently. I was beginning to foam from my mouth, and it was dripping down my cheeks.

“Having a brat on the battlefield, eh. It’s the same everywhere.”

As everything in my world was going blurry, the only thing I could still hear clearly was the coarse sounding voice of the man holding me.

“How pitiful. That’s right, at the very least, I’ll let you have some fun before dying. All children love to dream about flying, don’t they?”

As he said so, the man began laughing rather unpleasantly. Although I kept struggling –

I suddenly felt the pressure and pain against my neck disappear.

“Ah,”

My clothes were making annoying flapping sounds. My arms kept reflexively trying to grab onto something. All I got was handfuls of air.

After I was thrown off the top of the fort, although it was ridiculous, I couldn’t help but think of the free fall amusement park ride I rode before in my previous life.

At the same time, goosebumps were crawling up my flesh. I was rapidly approaching the ground, but my fear of death was completely dispersed due to the sound of my father’s howling laughter repeatedly echoing in my head.

Chapter 51
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 9

My voice wouldn't come out. In the end, that might have been lucky for me because I kept my mouth closed.

Someone grabbed me by my belly, and it felt like my internal organs would spill out. My vision was greatly shaking. There was very little pain.

The first thing I saw was the ground sliding by me. Then I noticed the shadow reflected on the ground. It was the shape of a draconis, gliding on the wind.

"You alright!?"

Right next to me, I heard a very familiar voice. In a different way from before, I caught my breath again. Even though he shouldn't have been here – to be more accurate, I had him sent away – how did he appear here at this moment in time? The inner corners of my eyes were getting warm, and I arbitrarily felt relief at hearing his voice.

However, anxiety was also doing battle with that sense of relief. My face stiffened, and what came out of my mouth sounded ice cold.

"……You disobeyed your orders. You left your post without permission."

Even though that wasn't what I wanted to say at all. However, the words I wanted to say got caught in the back of my throat, and wouldn't come out at all.

"Honestly, Charlie doesn't act cute at all."

With a gentle wry smile, he pulled me up onto Rashiok's back. Seeing his attitude as well caused my chest to tighten in pain.

– Kamil. Why are you here.

"Are you alright, Erbetia-dono!!"

From above me, I heard yet another familiar voice, coming from a red-winged draconis swirling and flapping about in the air. Its wings had a different colored hue from the reddish purple of Rashiok's wings, but it was beautiful as well, sparkling in the sun. This is probably one of Rashiok's siblings.

"Claudia-dono?"

On top of the draconis, I could see the stunning sight of Claudia and her beautiful blonde hair being buffeted by the wind. Maybe it's because we haven't seen each other for a while, she got my name ridiculously wrong. Who's Erbetia supposed to be, really.

Why are the two of them here, I wonder. As I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion, I noticed one more person behind Claudia.

"……Who's that?"

The face seems familiar, is what I thought. It belonged to a young man in his teenage years that was steadily maturing. His beautiful, dauntless features appeared slightly strict, and his cloak fluttering in the wind was unmistakably that of Fort Jugfena's knights.

His strict expression reminded me of Earl Terejia somehow. Maybe that's why I'm getting a sense of deja vu.

"We can talk later!"

That's the only thing he said, and the red-winged draconis flapped its wings and rose in the sky. Maybe they've already decided on some strategy, Kamil and Rashiok rose up as well. Being right next to them, I could hear the fluttering sounds of Rashiok's wings.

The two draconis soared lightly back up to Fort Jugfena's roof. Both sides that were busy killing each other looked up to see what was going on.

I wonder just what kind of balance sense she has, Claudia was somehow standing up on the red-winged draconis with her favorite spear in one hand, and bow and arrow in her other hand without falling off.

She was smiling in satisfaction, her joy at the situation was so pure that it was chilling. Still, it didn't remind me of father's dreadful smile, maybe it's because the emotion they're putting into it are different.

Then, without hesitation – Claudia jumped off the draconis's back. With weapons in hand, she landed gracefully in the middle of the battle taking place.

With the loud sound that was caused by Claudia's landing, a moment of silence descended over Fort Jugfena. It was still from quite a height that she jumped off, I wonder how she managed to do it without injuring herself. No matter how I look at it, I feel like the impact should have been too much for her to take.

I wonder just how much this girl breaks the rules of common sense. Claudia seemed so out of place and surreal here, that she actually lowered the tension of the battlefield.

Claudia inhaled and took a deep breath, and announced herself grandly.

"MY NAME IS CLAUDIA ROLENTSOR. I'M DEEPLY INDEBTED TO VISCOUNTESS KALDIA, SO FOR THIS BATTLE, I'M HERE TO AID THE KNIGHTS OF FORT JUGFENA!"

My eardrums were throbbing at her excessive volume. For the soldiers and knights standing closest to her, both enemies and allies were covering their ears as well.

Rather than this being an otome game world, it felt more like a shonen manga right now.

"GUNTHER-DONO!"

Once again, Claudia was raising her voice incredibly loudly, and she tossed her bow and arrows to Gunther who was surrounded by frozen enemy soldiers distracted by her spectacle. Gunther who was the fastest to return to normal among them quickly dropped his sword and caught the bow and arrows.

……A sword fell on an enemy soldier's foot.

"—Aghh!?"

When the enemies realized what was going on, Gunther was already firing his first arrow. An enemy soldier was shot right between his eyes and dropped his sword on his foot.

“That person, although he’s one of the finest among the army in both swordsmanship and the spear, his best weapon is actually the bow.”

While I was still processing what was going on, staring blankly at the sight in front of me, I heard Kamil speaking softly next to me.

The enemy soldiers were being cut down in swathes by Claudia’s spear, making me wonder just how her slender arms could have that much power to wield her weapon like that. It was almost like her spear was dancing, and she even knocked out an enemy behind her with a blow to the solar plexus with the spear handle. She was taking full advantage of the weight of a metal spear and making it seem like it weighed nothing, blowing away all her enemies.

My cheek twitched as I saw for myself what an unstoppable force she was.

Suddenly, I felt Kamil holding on to my stomach with one hand. Rashiok was descending.

With a roar, Rashiok scattered all the enemy soldiers in the vicinity as we glided on top of the tower connecting the nobles’ building and the knight building.

“Get down!”

Although it was a bit sudden and right after he said it, Kamil jumped off of Rashiok while holding on to me. I felt quite the impact, and my breath was knocked out of me.

“Right now!”

We had landed right next to the knights that were barely holding on while protecting the unconscious Earl Einsbark and Wiegraf. Kamil brought me to them while still holding on to me.

“It, it’s Claudia and Rashiok and company!”

“It’s alright, although the enemy is an annoying one, with their level we won’t be losing.”

Although the soldiers greeted us excitedly, Kamil responded back to them calmly. However, in my head I recalled the scene of Dominic and the other soldiers from my army dying.

Kamil just said that “we won’t lose.” He didn’t say that “nobody would die.”

However, this is a war after all, there’s no helping it. In battle, soldiers have the realization that they may die at any time, and haven’t I been leading them all this time while knowing that as well.

I swallowed my saliva to help me breathe again, and finally felt like I was clearing my mind.

Instead of wishing for everyone to live, I wished for victory. Only victory would give their sacrificed lives meaning.

Because I know that, that’s why I’ve come here.

That’s why, in order to connect myself to their feelings, I have to live as much as possible. At the very least, I won’t allow myself to be killed for revenge just because I let my guard down.

I could feel an ice cold feeling reviving myself, and helping my body to recover its energy. I struggled free from Kamil’s arm holding on to me.

“-Charlie?”

“I can run for myself.”

When he reached his hand out to me in puzzlement, I casually dodged it. Even Kamil might try to kill me someday – if he ever finds out what I’m guilty of.

For example, even if he cuts me down right now, I’m sure it’ll just be written off as me having been “killed in action.” If Kamil really wanted to kill me and get away with it, this war will be a golden opportunity for him.

– Kamil. Why have you come here.

Once again, I asked myself that question in my mind, and I felt a piercing pain in my chest.

Chapter 52
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 10

The knights carrying Earl Einsbark and Wiegraf went through the nobles' building and headed straight for the hidden passage leading to the cave. There's probably nowhere else that can serve as a place to shelter nobles.

Since it's clear now that the enemy has taken over Fort Jugfena, without even knowing their total numbers or the route they took, hiding in the hidden passage that the enemy probably doesn't know about for the time being is probably the best course of action.

Mixing along with the knights, Kamil and I escaped as well.

As we headed down a long corridor in the nobles' building, I saw a wide space that was gaudily decorated. It's the space that serves as an entrance hall to the nobles' building, connecting the second and third floors. Since the first floor is for the servants, that's why the entrance hall for welcoming guests to the nobles' building is on the second floor.

Because this is about the halfway point, after having escaped to here, I was finally able to loosen up slightly and slacken the tension in my shoulders. Although I didn't actually run for that long, due to the abnormal feeling of being on the battlefield, the time felt unpleasantly longer than usual.

After passing through this hall and the next one, that's where the big hall with the hidden passage should be.

However.

"-Wait! Stop!"

A knight running in front of us raised his voice to stop us. Everyone immediately got ready for battle. I also tightly gripped the hilt of my sword, and slightly pulled it out of its sheath.

The tension in the air was so thick it felt almost visible. I did my best to sharpen my five senses as much as possible, to notice anything at all – and I heard a light sound.

“What’s there!?”

“Be quiet!!”

Someone had quite a sharp tone of voice. And with that, the knights fell silent, even hiding the sounds of their breathing as much as possible. The entrance hall of the nobles’ building instantly became completely silent.

……Then, I heard a more horribly dreadful sound than I’ve ever heard before.

It was a rattling sound, caused by something unknown. It sort of sounded like the sound a wooden instrument would make when you hit it. The rattling sound was echoing throughout the hallway.

Something was in the next hallway. While being as vigilant as possible, some of the knights began advancing to determine the source of the sound.

I swallowed slightly as I heard some more sounds. Then, I suddenly heard screaming.

“-Run! It’s magical beasts! It’s baboons from the Monster Forest, Abijhanas!”

At that moment, vulgar sounding laughter echoed through the hallway. So that’s what it was. The laughter came from a magical beast that sounded quite similar to humans. Everyone began running back at full speed, forgetting to even breathe.

Magical beasts, why would monster baboons be here now at this timing. This is the worst.

A monster baboon is one of the most brutal, ferocious, and intelligent types of monsters living in the Monster Forest. But, usually monsters from the Monster Forest shouldn’t be coming out on their own.

We ran to the tower that connected the nobles’ building to the knight building. But the moment we reached the knight building, another knight that was leading the way screamed again.

“It’s no good, the enemy’s here!!”

“To the tower! Go through the tower to the third floor!”

Once again we turned back, this time running back to the tower from before, climbing back up the tower that we had just run down a few minutes earlier. While the knights jostled each other as they climbed up the narrow spiral staircase, finally the last person came up and they put a bar over the door.

“Hurry!”

It’s obvious that a bar alone wouldn’t be much to stop the enemy. I could already hear the sound of a body hitting against the door, with a crushing sound resounding throughout the tower.

It was a frightening sound that spurred us onwards.

Just as I reached the third floor’s hallway, I could hear a dull thud behind me as the door was knocked over and crashed against the stone floor.

“Hurry up, to the main hall!”

I could hear some people chasing after us, but that was all I knew. I didn’t have the time to turn around and look.

Since the knights were still carrying the two injured nobles, it would be very difficult to stop and counterattack the enemy here. I mean, in the first place, I’m not much better than baggage, same as the two unconscious over there, so the knights probably won’t ask for my opinion.

Maybe the enemy doesn’t have bows, they weren’t shooting arrows at us, but other projectiles were flying towards us. It was getting to an extent where it was getting harder to run due to things cluttering the corridors.

I ran as fast as I could so that I’d be a difficult target, but something like a plate crashed into the wall next to me and cracked, leaving some slight pain on my cheek as one of its shards scratched me.

There’s nothing I can do at all about the fact that I’m still small and slow, and I was falling farther and farther behind, into the back ranks.

Suddenly, someone grabbed my arm, and pulled me behind him. When I realized what was going on, it was Kamil who had changed places with me for some reason.

Uwaa, a sound of surprise came out of me. However, it was drowned out by a boom. Everything in my vision became pure white as something exploded in front of my eyes.

While carrying me, Kamil was running away from the explosion point as fast as he could. On the edges of my vision, I could see pillars of fire rising. I could only stare dumbfounded in blank amazement as the carpet and the curtains on the barred windows went up in flames instantly. Kamil covered me as much as he could, and I don't know whether to say it was more like he was carrying me or dragging me, he ran with me in the opposite direction from the one where we were heading just earlier.

I could just make out that the glass windows were cracking and shattering, with the pieces blowing outside. I could feel it getting hotter and hotter behind me. The woolen carpets are making it really easy for the fire to burn. My heart was beating so fast that I wondered if I would get a heart attack.

What was that? A bomb? No way.

I've never heard of such a weapon being invented here, and gunpowder's not at that level here. Maybe it's at the level of being able to create Molotov cocktails, but even those can't explode. What's more, until that explosion happened, I've never seen such a fire like that either.

My body felt like it was floating. Kamil was lifting me up with one hand. And, I took a deep breath at what I saw.

Kamil's right arm that was holding on to me was badly burned and it was dripping blood. It must be from the bomb earlier – did he protect me from the explosion?

Come to think of it, there's a dull, numb pain on my hands and feet and cheeks. When I looked down at myself, it wasn't as bad as Kamil, but I was bleeding all over the place.

It's not to the point where my life would be in danger, and maybe it's because my blood is actively circulating around, even though I should be hotheaded right now, my head was miraculously and terribly ice cold clear.

As if fog was clearing, I remembered some previously blurry fragmented memories from my previous life.

……That's right, guns appeared in the Arxia Kingdom where this otome game had taken place. Although it was a muzzle loader type, I remember there was a conversation about using them to suppress magical beasts.

Nothing's happened in this world like the scenarios in the game, but if guns aren't supposed to be considered rare in seven to eight years, then of course there should be gunpowder in this world. Even if Arxia doesn't have such technology right now, maybe Densel does, or maybe it was obtained by the country of Parmigran as they trade on the seas with many other countries.

Chapter 53
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 11

Anyways, to think that monster baboons would suddenly appear in Fort Jugfena. When we passed by the third floor the first time, those monsters hadn't been there in the entrance hall.

The timing, and the fact that they're in the fort, everything is going too good for Densel.

Suddenly, something occurred to me.

When I first came to Fort Jugfena, I had seen a bloodstained red seeping out from the misty Monster Forest while it was hazy and drizzling. It couldn't be. There shouldn't be anyone that would go to the Monster Forest. Perhaps, it was Densel soldiers that were making preparations already so that they could invade us through the Monster Forest. On top of that, they must have had the ability to transport monster baboons here to Fort Jugfena.

It doesn't seem real. But, I can't think of any other explanation. I can't think of any other reason why there would be monster baboons here in Fort Jugfena.

"Get out of my way!!"

While still holding on to me with one arm, Kamil dove straight into our pursuers behind us. It felt like my heart was freezing over.

I was wondering if Kamil wanted to kill me so much that he would be willing to die as well, fear, anger, and suspicion were all welling up within me. But it's too late to escape from his arm now. The fire's right behind me.

Kamil dodged the slashes from the attackers closest to us, and just like long ago when he cut down the earth lizard, he killed someone with a single stab. The point of Kamil's sword went in between the enemy's clavicle and the soft fleshy part of his neck.

As expected, that winter day Kamil had been trying to hide his true skills from me. My face was turning slightly pale.

Kamil dodged the next attacker's sword swing easily, and he even slit the throat of the man hiding behind him waiting to ambush us. He did all of this with a backhanded grip on his sword, and without even looking. Smack, I heard another soft sound and the splashing of some warm liquid.

In an instant, Kamil killed three people like it was nothing. I could only watch what was going on in a daze.

At the same time, I was so scared that goosebumps were crawling up my flesh. He has the skill to kill people so easily – no, why does Kamil have the training to be able to specialize in killing people so easily.

While repeating his movements robotically, Kamil kept dodging all enemies' attacks and slicing their throats, and in less than five minutes, Kamil had taken out all twentyish pursuers by himself. There was so much blood that it was seeping into the carpet, and blood was splashing everywhere and making ripples as it dripped off of Kamil's hair. A smell of iron mixed in with the smell of death, and my stomach started overturning and I began to hurl. Because I only had a light breakfast, at least there wasn't much to throw up.

After I finished throwing up, Kamil's blood-covered left hand touched my back.

"You alright?"

As he asked me, he started running with me again. There's monster baboons on the second floor, and the third floor is covered in fire, there's no path to the hidden passage.

It seems that he's not going to kill me in those pools of blood, I wonder if it's because he doesn't have the time to as the fire is still coming after us, – or maybe he just wants to get to the bottom of my identity first before killing me.

On the other side of the flames, are the knights carrying Earl Einsbark and Wiegraf still okay? There was only one knight left behind on this side of the fire, but due to being seriously injured by shrapnel from the explosion, he had died in the fire.

"……Where are we going?"

Why is it that, it feels so painful to just open my mouth. My hands and feet feel so hot. I feel like they're burning in the fire. Kamil looked down at me and my expression that looked like it was about to cry. Whatever his facial expression meant, I'm too tired to even think about it right now.

"Somewhere…… Anywhere, that's safe……"

Just as Kamil replied to me in a soft voice, in the distance I heard the booming sound of another explosion. It came from above us. It must be another explosive. Then, another explosion followed shortly after it. It seems that going up will be a bad idea.

"……Let, me down. I can, run on my own……"

I was muttering. Kamil either didn't or pretended not to hear me, and he adjusted me in his grip as if to make me more comfortable, and increased his speed even more.

We passed the tower, and went through the knight building all the way to the barracks. Since the enemies had kept coming from the south, I thought that we would get annihilated by enemy soldiers there, but contrary to my expectations there were few enemies, and Kamil disposed of all the enemy soldiers that weren't wearing our tunics without a sound.

The nobles' building had stopped burning. After the carpet and curtains were burned up, there's nothing else other than rough, sturdy stone corridors.

Why had Kamil killed so many and brought me here, I wonder. As I thought, is he trying to kill me? But then why isn't he killing me yet.

I'm so tired, that I could only keep thinking about this in circles, but because my analyzation level had gone down so much I couldn't even get an answer.

As I heard some mayhem outside the window, that's when it happened.

Chapter 54
Defensive battle at Fort Jugfena, Part 12

Even though he didn't put me down, at least Kamil brought me closer to the window.

Outside the window, the castle door had been broken down, and waves of people were flooding in. When I saw soldiers wearing the insignia of the Densel army, I felt chilled to the bone.

– However, driving them like sheep, seeming like they were chasing and routing the enemy, were knights from the 1st Cavalry Platoon wearing our black tunics.

The 1st Cavalry Platoon was in high spirits as they trapped the remnants of the enemy army against the fort's walls. I witnessed Ergnade calmly strolling through the castle door, still dressed in black while surrounded by knights.

I'm glad he's okay.

He's in the back of the center formation of the army, and he's responsible for coordinating the left wing, the right wing, and the mobile divisions to stop the Densel attack against us.

Of course, his risk of dying in battle is quite high.

Although he's safe, there's still risk as there's nobody that could take his place.

He taught me the halberd, he served as my escort at the fort, and just like my previous life's parents – it felt like he was taking such good care of me just like them, even though I'm just someone he didn't know until he was ordered to be with me, even though I had locked away knowledge of how a family should feel like away in a corner in my mind ever since I killed mine, thinking there's no helping it.

Anyways, it seems that the battle on the Great Plains has been decided and things are turning back in our favor. I couldn't help but let go of my breath and sigh. I'm pretty sure that it's because I'm relieved.

I finally allowed myself to relax and calm down a little.

“-Please…… help…… me……”

I suddenly heard a faint voice, maybe it’s because I was able to calm myself down and focus more on my surroundings.

It was a faint voice that I could barely hear on the wind. The first time I heard it, I even wondered if I was hearing things.

“Pl, -se…… he-…… me……”

“Kamil, do you hear something?”

“Hm? ……Ah, you’re right.”

It’s the weak voice of someone crying out for help. As for whether it’s coming from an enemy or an ally, I don’t know.

I don’t know where the voice is coming from, but considering the way this fort is built it can’t be far from us. It must be coming from a location close by.

As I thought about the voice, either it’s due to my relief, or that my brain has gotten some rest and is no longer in such a tense state, it was much easier for me to think things through.

“Let’s go take a look. If it’s someone we should help then we can help. If it’s an enemy we can just leave them be.”

“Charlie, that’s……”

Kamil hesitantly disagreed with me. However, my fear and distrust of Kamil was still strong in my mind.

He hid his skill with the sword from me, and definitely deceived me about it. He also rushed here to Fort Jugfena for some reason without any orders of the sort.

However, all these suspicions are also making me weary and heavy on my heart.

I can’t trust him. But, I don’t want to doubt him anymore.

If I'm alone with him, I get even more stressed out. Since today has been completely out of the ordinary with a battle going on, and precisely because I saw for myself just how skilled Kamil is, I really don't want to be alone with him. I really want to get to somewhere with someone else around, so wanting to escape, I deceived him as well.

Meaning, I simply can't just trust Kamil right now. Even if he protected me from the bomb's explosion with his right arm and got himself burned and full of holes. Whenever I'm alone with him, I can't shake the feeling from my mind that he might point his sword at me at any moment.

"……Got it."

It seems that Kamil felt there was no helping it, so he finally left the windowside. Then, he opened the door to the closest room.

Nothing but silence greeted us in this room, there was only a simple desk and a bed inside. It doesn't even seem like this place was disturbed, it seems that wherever that voice came from, it wasn't from here.

"Maybe it's from the next room?"

Kamil casually opened the door to the next room.

There was nothing in the next room as well, and only dead corpses that wouldn't move were in the room after that, we checked to make sure that none of them were still living. It took us a few minutes to check through all the dead people, then we headed on to the next rooms.

Some of the rooms were locked. Just in case the enemy had stolen some keys and locked the rooms or some such, Kamil opened each of the doors with some sort of thin metal cylinder as a lockpick. At seeing yet another dangerous skill, I was quite shaken.

As we kept searching through the rooms, I could no longer hear the voice calling for help.

"It didn't sound that far away from us……"

"Maybe they're unconscious, or they even could have died by now."

“Even if that’s so, and there’s no helping it, Charlie won’t be satisfied until we look everywhere, right?”

Kamil’s arm was shaking slightly as he kept holding on to me.

I actually don’t care all that much if we find the owner of that voice or not. However, I can’t say that out loud right now. It seems that my lies are piling up more and more……

Since I remained silent without agreeing or disagreeing, Kamil also didn’t say anything.

This is the last room. This is the room in the farthest corner of the barracks, and Kamil and I both listened closely for sounds.

I can’t hear anything. Whether it’s calls for help, panting, moaning, or even scratching sounds.

Kamil twisted the doorknob. He pushed the door open. I saw clearly into the room.

– There were signs that a battle had taken place in this room, but there was nobody in sight at all.

“No one’s-”

here, is what I was just about to say when it happened.

I could feel the unmistakable taste of blood in my mouth spreading, and something shook my entire body. There was something stuck in my mouth that I had bitten on.

At the same time, there was a terribly harsh sound of an impact. Boom, and then I heard the sound of flesh ripping apart.

Kamil’s body was slightly shaking. Urgh, I heard him moaning under his breath.

Chapter 55
Conclusion of the defensive battle at Fort Jugfena

Since Kamil's shoulder was covering me, I had no idea what was going on.

I heard the door slam shut violently with a loud bang – then, from the other side of the door, I could hear some sort of raucous roaring laughter coming from a monster baboon.

Kamil jumped to the next room over with me. He hastily tossed me on top of the bed, and I landed face first on the downy blanket. I immediately raised myself up on my arms, and saw Kamil piling up some furniture in front of the door. The dressing table, chair, a clothes box, a chest – without saying anything, he was quickly stacking them up.

I also seem to have bit Kamil's finger just earlier when whatever it was happened. I wonder if he had let me do it on purpose so that I didn't bite my tongue.

Kamil was bleeding from his sides as he moved the furniture around. However, just as I was about to get up and move, when I took another look at Kamil, my body couldn't help but stiffen.

Just then, there was a tapping sound on the door. It started off soft at first, but kept getting louder and louder.

I could hear an unpleasant rattling sound together with that eerie laughter from the other side of the door. Something was hitting the door now. It's continuing to get even louder.

Is it playing around, this monster baboon that's causing these sounds. It disgustingly feels like as if it's having fun toying with its prey that it's chased and cornered.

Soon, Kamil seemed to run out of energy and sat down with his back against the pile of furniture.

I got up, and stared at Kamil again. He seemed to be shaking all over his body, and it seemed like his strength was leaving him.

“K, Kamil……”

A pathetic, trembling voice came out of me. What am I trying to say to him at this point in time, me.

That monster baboon must have been mimicking the sound of someone crying out for help, no matter how I think about it this situation is my fault that we’ve fallen for its trap.

Blood kept flowing out of Kamil’s sides endlessly, seeping into the stone floor. He seems to have injured his internal organs, as dark blood was dripping out of the corner of Kamil’s mouth.

I didn’t move even one finger. My brain was numb, and I couldn’t do anything other than stare at Kamil.

Even though we were alone together, even in rooms filled with corpses, Kamil didn’t kill me. It’s my distrust towards him that’s led to this current situation.

With those sorts of injuries, all he can do is wait for death. There’s such a large hole in his side, and his internal organs are injured as well with no way to give him medical treatment.

The back of my throat was aching with something hot. My sight turned blurry, as lukewarm water started splashing down my cheeks from my eyes.

Kamil merely smiled gently at me. It felt like my heart was being squeezed to pieces.

“……It’s fine. It can’t be helped, this is my job.”

Kamil opened his mouth and spoke to me in a weak voice. He kept coughing up horrific amounts of blood, and his body was trembling violently now. He’s shaking so badly, I’m pretty sure he’s realized his own situation as well.

“You couldn’t, trust in me, right? As for the things I hid from you, to the best of my abilities, it was something that couldn’t be helped.”

As Kamil continued speaking in a piecemeal manner, the hitting sounds against the door were continuing to grow in volume. I don't think I've ever been so annoyed in my life before. I want to listen to Kamil talking without having to listen over those sounds.

"You probably knew that I'm the son of, the merchant, that, killed, your family."

I couldn't even nod, all I could do was listen to his words, forgetting to even breathe.

"I'm sorry…… that my father, killed, your entire family. That's why, to make up for it, I wanted to at the very least, protect you. I mean, you're really just a small child."

In the middle, Kamil's voice suddenly got even choppier, and he had gotten so passionate that it was moving me to tears.

Do I want to cry and scream at the top of my lungs, or should I be begging Kamil for forgiveness right now, my feelings and regrets were swirling about inside me like a vortex right now.

However, that as well, ended quickly and it felt like I was deflating like a balloon. The feelings that were bloating me just earlier were nowhere to be found.

Everything is something that I've caused myself. Since everything is my fault, I think it'll be for the best if I just honestly tell Kamil that I was the root of everything.

"-No, that's not it, Kamil……"

Before I realized it, I was slowly shaking my head. Since I wasn't able to accept before that Kamil had no ill will towards me and wasn't plotting against me – of course he'd never forgive me. I know that I'm only telling him to selfishly lessen the burden on myself.

My bad habit of clenching my fists as tightly as I could showed itself again, and my nails were digging deep ridges into my palms.

"……Char, lie?"

Kamil's voice was confused, and he seemed to stop himself from trembling as much as he could, to make eye contact with me.

“I myself was the one who killed my family. Kamil, your father was falsely accused of it and executed for a crime he didn’t commit. ……I’m really sorry about what happened.”

Kamil was looking at me wide-eyed in amazement, looking at me so directly that I really felt like averting my eyes. My body was completely tense. I couldn’t breathe.

What will he say.

Well now that I’ve said it, I’m regretting it.

Why did I tell Kamil something about my treacherous self when he’s on the verge of death, I wonder. I must only be searching for my own self-satisfaction, pouring out my guilt to him.

I felt like gouging at myself as I wallowed in self-loathing.

Kamil quietly closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

“-……Oh, so that’s what happened.”

Really, his voice remained so calm.

– Then, Kamil didn’t open his eyes. While trembling, I took a step. I got down from the bed, and crawled to Kamil’s side.

“Kamil……?”

I hesitantly touched his blood-caked face with my hand, finding that his blood was already drying. His face was frightfully cold, and I shuddered involuntarily.

“……I can’t, move anymore…… ……It can’t be, helped…… Charlie’s……”

As if he found things really annoying, Kamil sighed deeply.

He sluggishly lifted his hand, and hugged my head against his right shoulder. Although I was thrown a bit off balance by his body weight, and had to use a hand to support myself, I obediently let him hug me.

Close by to me, it felt like the monster baboon was about to break down the door at any moment, the crashing sounds against the door had gotten so loud.

However, for some reason I didn't feel scared at all.

More than that, I was more scared of how fast I could feel Kamil's body warmth leaving him even touching him through his clothes.

I slid my head down from his shoulder slightly, to his left breast.

When I heard that his heart was still beating feebly, I felt so relieved that I started crying.

He's still alive.

Without even worrying about the crashing sounds against the door, I just listened to his heartbeat get weaker and weaker.

– Then, I couldn't hear it anymore, and his hand against my head fell limp to the ground.

Outside the door, I heard a terrible screaming sound coming from the monster baboon. The sound of people shouting echoed throughout the hallways. I think I heard Ergnade's voice among them.

Chapter 56
The bitter result of my crime

"……Densel has issued a statement saying that they have nothing to do with the incident that occurred at Fort Jugfena. It seems that they're treating it as an isolated incident caused by exiled soldiers."

Earl Terejia told me so in a quiet voice, and I was only half listening to him while thinking of other things.

It felt foggy inside my head. I heard that Claudia was completely uninjured, that Ergnade and Gunther only suffered light injuries, and that the Shiru tribe in the hidden passage remained safe, but that did nothing to help clear up the fog.

Although the enemy's plan failed and we defended Fort Jugfena successfully, it was a difficult, close victory with many losses. Three entire infantry squadrons were wiped out, and all archers were dead as well. On top of that, the commander of the fort, Earl Einsbark, as well as his son Wiegraf, they were seriously injured, and twenty soldiers from the fifty soldiers I took with me to Fort Jugfena died in battle as well, costing me forty percent of my army.

What's more, the invading soldiers had likely focused on destroying Arxia's lines of defense, the rampart alongside our border was smashed all over the place, and there were quite a few holes in Fort Jugfena and its walls as well, we've been dealt quite a blow.

The Densel Dukedom is saying that all of this was a private war waged by exiled soldiers, thus having nothing to do with them. They only prepared a slight compensation for us by selling off the properties of those involved, and executing all the responsible parties and their relatives.

It seems that the group of soldiers had been exiled after a political defeat, and that they had been from a group that opposed Densel uniting together with the Rindarl Union.

While looking for a way to survive, they attacked Arxia thinking that the other three countries might reconsider letting Densel into the Rindarl Union if Densel was involved in a war with Arxia, that seems to have been their motive. Being worried about how relations between Arxia and Rindarl would be, Densel would prefer not to have bad relations with us. Well, that's their excuse, but I'm sure it's all just lip service and was plotted by them.

Meaning, all Arxia got was the execution of the so-called anti-Rindarl Union members.

Of course, saying such things, Arxia is quite angry and discontent as well. Not only did Densel attack us unprovoked, they even abandoned their own citizens and shifted all the blame to them, having the soldiers executed saying they were exiled political discontents.

The ones who lost the most was us, as the Kaldia domain was supposed to take in the new Artolan refugees that had all died, and the Shiru tribe. Although Densel attacked Fort Jugfena unprovoked and without warning, since Fort Jugfena was on standard combat alert, damage could have been even worse.

However, the northern Arxian nobles loudly blamed the harboring of refugees from a former defeated country that was enemies with Densel for causing this skirmish, it seems that there's no way of stopping the world from viewing these things as having caused the skirmish anymore.

"The House of Lords has made its decision on the matter, the battle that occurred will not be treated as an invasion by Densel, and it will be treated as a private war waged by exiled soldiers. This is in order to quell the anger of the northern nobles, so no matter how angry we are inside, we have no choice but to take it quietly and accept the paltry compensation money offered by Densel."

For once, Earl Terejia didn't even try to hide his irritation, but I didn't really care. I felt like politics didn't matter to me at all right now.

Everything felt blank to me right now. My head was filled with fog and I couldn't think clearly, I even wondered just what Earl Terejia was getting so angry about.

"The church had openly called out for us to protect the Artolan refugees. None of them publicly opposed that back then."

Since the church had openly proclaimed that the Artolan refugees and the Shiru tribe would be protected, anyone saying something otherwise could have been excommunicated and persecuted for being a heretic.

Even more than being a heretic, it's excommunication that would affect one for life. Since the Arxia Kingdom and the Ar Xia church are inextricably interconnected, being excommunicated would mean there's no place for them anymore. This is even more so for nobles, they wouldn't dare go directly against the church that's in charge of the law.

The issue of the church being in charge of the law aside, the Ar Xia church usually almost never involves itself in the country's national affairs. This time had been extremely rare for it to act like that, is what I had thought at the time.

My mind feels numb, I don't feel like thinking any more deeper into these matters. Even though this is all something that deeply involves me, right now I don't care about others' expectations or feelings at all.

"……That's all. Well, for now you can just take things slow and get some rest."

Earl Terejia seemed to worry about me with his last comment, as he left my room. My nanny Mrs. Hortensia remained standing quietly beside me, as I pulled the cushion supporting my back away, and laid back down on my bed. Her expression was softly distorted, and her eyes were closed.

I can tell that she's pitying me, and the way I am now, I could only receive it without any sort of mercy on myself.

I don't even feel like I deserve to receive pity, and my usual dedication to work had disappeared without a trace. Without even trying to clear my mind, I simply closed my eyelids.

Was it because I'm tired, I don't even know. However, I do know for certain that I want to fall into a deep sleep.

From the other side of my bedroom door, I could hear a slightly muffled voice.

"She didn't move at all again today?"

"……Yes. ……It's already been like this for one month. Eliza-sama's not doing anything by herself at all, other than blinking her eyes and breathing."

"I see. This is, no matter what, sad for a child as young as her…… I'm sorry, but please keep taking care of her. Please don't mind that you have to take care of her meals and body, someone experienced in these types of things is coming in a few days……"

……After that, I couldn't hear what followed after anymore. The blurry words got lost in the fog, and disappeared somewhere into my mind.

I'm so sleepy, is all I thought. That's all I could think, and my consciousness completely sank into the depths of the fog.

End of Act 1, Part 3

【 PART IV 】

Chapter 57
The same name, Part 1

(Translator notes for anyone that missed it, turns out Ratoka is a guy that's being forced to act as a girl by Eliza when in the mansion. Also, as a recap for anyone who's forgotten some characters, Ratoka is the villager kid that threw a rock at Eliza and subsequently got arrested. Eliza faked his execution, and kept him as a potential body double because he looks similar to her, saying that their shared eye color, red, is very rare and impossible to fake, and created a fake identity, "Elise Cherstoka," for him to act as in order to spread misinformation and confuse any potential future enemies. This fake name is purposefully similar to another girl currently living at Eliza's mansion, Elise Sherstok, who is a noble girl with a sickly body that's currently recovering at the Kaldia mansion, since the Kaldia domain has a climate that's well suited for her illness. Hopefully this summary helps anyone who's forgotten the details, as these two characters haven't appeared for quite a while. The next 10+ chapters will be told from Ratoka's point of view, and it's actually narrated in third person instead of first person, so hopefully I do a good job, as it's my first time tackling the third person perspective.)

……Ratoka smelled the faint scent of flowers, and opened his eyes.

He still couldn't get used to the feeling of these clothes against his body. He missed the familiar scent of straw, and he laid and rolled on the bed a bit before getting up.

Since it's not his usual wooden bed, but covered fully with soft cloths instead, it's very uncomfortable for him. Well, due to that, he's been getting up earlier than before, that might be the only good thing about it.

Then, he sighed deeply. There was a single flower placed by the pillow, giving his entire room a sweet smell.

This room is narrow and made of solid stone walls, and the loud snores of people in the connecting rooms echo loudly in his room as well. He pushed away the wooden board covering the window, and let the faint sunlight shine in.

It's a little before dawn.

As the moon and sun changed places, the reddish tinged sunrise that only lasted for a short time each morning was the most beautiful time of day, is what he thought.

He kept watching the sky until it turned completely blue. His mind which was still groggy until then, finally began functioning.

When he remembered the face of the person that had taught him the beauty of sunrises, he felt a pain in his chest. She was a sister in training from the church that had been out on patrol. He only knew her for a short time, but, that's exactly why he remembered her eye color, as clear blue as the sky, so clearly.

It was almost time to get up, so he turned away from the window, got out of bed, and knocked on the wood and iron knocker installed in the middle of the barracks. The loud knocking finally interrupted that annoying snoring, and hauled the sordid men out of their dreams.

"It's morning, get up, you middle-aged men."

"……Oh, ohh. Morn'in, Ratoka."

"All of you, would never wake up at all if I went easy on you, every morning……"

He's already been here for two weeks. Whoever wakes up first in the morning is supposed to wake everyone else up with the knocker, but ever since he's come here, he's been the only person that's ever woke everyone else up.

This morning as well, the adult soldiers blew him away, and after falling down ten times, Ratoka reached his physical limits.

Although this always happened, the uncouth soldiers would always stick around watching him, ridiculing him and laughing at him every time his sword got knocked out of his hand. Even more humiliating, today the soldiers didn't even give him time to catch his breath as they hooted at him.

The jeers today were,

"Oi oi, how pathetic! Even Charlie was better than this when she was five years old!"

“If you can’t even beat a five year old little girl, all you’re gonna be good for is harvesting wheat!”

“That’s why, young master Ratoka is an ‘ojou-san,’ I say!”

That’s what was being said.

Ratoka had been forced to the barracks by the earl, and the earl had told the soldiers to “give Ratoka the same training that Viscountess Kaldia went through,” so of course the soldiers would compare him to that girl at everything, and since Ratoka wasn’t as good as her, everyone called him “ojou-san.”

Ratoka already had a complex about his rather girlish looking face, so calling him an “ojou-san,” meaning lady, only increased his humiliation.

“Shut up! I’m not the same as that Charlie bastard, this is my first time learning swordsmanship!!”

Ratoka was so irritated that he shouted out at the soldiers, and they fell silent for a moment. Just as Ratoka finally thought he would get some quiet, the soldiers started laughing even louder than before.

“Charlie you say, hahaha, she’s never even touched a sword before she came here to train with us!”

At that retort, even Ratoka was unable to find a comeback. “Damn you all!!” He couldn’t find anything to say, so all he could do was curse at everyone in foul language.

Nobles learn the sword starting from a young age. The young sister that had stayed in Cyril village several years ago had definitely said that to him.

At first, he had thought that he should go through with and endure this sword training, but now he can’t take all the jeering anymore. Now that he’s discovered his skill level, his already battered pride is in shreds.

More than anything else, he hates the person he’s being compared to. This girl they’re calling Charlie, the daughter of the noble Ratoka hates more than anything – or more accurately speaking, the current domain lord.

Seeing Ratoka's face distort as he was unable to even express his anger and frustration properly, even the soldiers realized that they may have gone a little overboard, and they stopped laughing. That laughter that was so annoying had finally stopped, and it's quiet now, but Ratoka was too angry to care anymore.

"-Well, um, what is it. You shouldn't hate our lord so much."

Someone among the soldiers mumbled that, and some of the other soldiers also mumbled in agreement, and they scattered, as the atmosphere had gotten cooler.

"-What is all this!!"

Ratoka made a fist with his right hand and hit the ground in frustration, then he heard a voice colder than any he'd ever heard before.

"You wake up so early, you damned brat. If you're still that energetic, why don't you practice some more with me for another five rounds?"

At the same moment, Ratoka's wooden sword that had been knocked out of his hand came flying down again and hit his stomach, causing him to moan.

Even though he was only eight years old, Ratoka recklessly glared at his opponent Gunther. Gunther who had his foot on top of Ratoka's head as he laid down on the ground, defeated, returned a sharp gaze back at him.

"……Sorry."

Although Ratoka reluctantly apologized, Gunther's gaze didn't change at all. Gunther finally pulled his leg back a bit, and Ratoka hurriedly jumped up and retrieved his sword.

He felt like Gunther was about to kick him, and he was right.

Ratoka barely managed to dodge Gunther's foot by a hair's breadth, and Gunther tut tutted.

"Come on, don't laze around, let's start already!"

"Yes, Gunther-sensei."

Ratoka nodded, and Gunther started attacking him again.

……It only took two attacks, before Ratoka was knocked over on the ground again.

In the afternoon, he has to go forage for his own dinner. That's the rule of this domain's army.

His physical strength was pushed to its limits to the point where he was throwing up, so of course it was impossible for him to do any hunting in his state of extreme fatigue. At least, that's what Ratoka thought.

He's used to feeling hungry anyways. Sulking and telling himself that he was doing it out of defiance, Ratoka had never once gone out to forage for dinner.

Instead –

"Ah, you've come today as well?" (Elise) *(Translator note: going to use parentheses to show who is speaking for this section to reduce confusion, as Ratoka goes by 'Elise' as well when in the mansion.)*

Still caring about what others thought of him… he basically dragged his body through the shadows, as he glared at Eliza's mansion, a symbol of the former domain lord he hated so much. Then, from a section of the garden's complicated layout, he heard a soft voice from a window above him.

"Elise-sama!" (Ratoka)

When Ratoka looked up, he saw a girl meet his eyes, perched with her elbows on the windowsill from her room on the second floor. She looked delighted to see him, and laughed happily and elegantly.

"Hehehe…… How funny. You're also 'Elise-sama,' aren't you?" (Elise)

Although he still felt slightly bitter at being called that, he swallowed it down and smiled back at the girl. More importantly to Ratoka, he's happy that Elise seems healthy and energetic again today.

"Elise-sama, what shall we talk about today?" (Elise)

“Anything. ……But anyways, Elise-sama, I…… when you address me, you really don’t have to add -sama.” (Ratoka)

Ratoka mumbled a bit, and finally uttered a tiny wish of his. Although he comes here and says that every time, Elise would always smile happily and say “sorry,” but she never once nodded and agreed to his request.

Well, his true wish is to actually have Elise call him by his real name, “Ratoka,” but he’s strictly forbidden from telling Elise his real name.

That’s why, at the very least, he hoped that Elise could address him more familiarly.

Talking with a noble girl, he’s scared to ask her for anything more than that – and he’s also confused, because Elise doesn’t fit his mental image of how a “noble” should be at all.

He’s always believed that nobles were arrogant spendthrifts that never thought about commoners at all, that didn’t know how to do anything other than look pretty and make idle chatter. Although it was just the sister in training that had told him that, he’s never heard anything else about nobles, nor does he want to hear.

Unfortunately, the now former lord of this domain, was even worse than the nobles she talked about, is what he had thought.

However, Elise who always smiled gently at him, he couldn’t think of her as a typical noble at all.

He felt himself idolizing Elise, believing her to be special, and Ratoka viewed her as sacred.

However, the difference between nobles has him even more irritated. Every single day, when he’s in the barracks, he has to hear her name over and over again, that name he associates with everything bad about nobles, – the girl that the soldiers also call Charlie, Eliza. He hates everything about her, that damned Kaldia daughter.

What’s “Charlie” even supposed to mean, Ratoka had asked the soldiers this morning.

Charlie. A name passed down in the ancient language of the Jugfena region. From even before St. Ahar created the Ar Xia Kingdom a millenium ago, he’s now a story told at bedtime about a legendary king that had ruled over the entire Jugfena region.

What's "Charlie" supposed to be.

While he smiled at Elise, once again in the back of his mind, Ratoka spat at Eliza.

Chapter 58
The same name, Part 2

(More translator notes: so starting this chapter we get to see what the new arc is likely going to be about. I'd like to point out that I have now romanized Shiriru village into Cyril village, partly because to reduce confusion with the similarly named Shiru tribe and partly because I played Grandia II and there's a place called Cyril in that game. Just mentioning in case anyone is confused/lost as to where Cyril village is. And as a reminder, it's also where Ratoka's from.)

Ratoka has been in the barracks for a month and a half now, and he's gained enough strength to the point where he isn't throwing up anymore.

However, he's still not foraging for his own dinner at night, he's still going every day without eating any dinner.

Today, his marching distance training was increased in length. Still, he's expected to remain standing and finish all of it. His feet hurt so badly after it all, that Ratoka didn't even visit Elise, and just crawled straight into his bed after training.

Speaking of hunting for food – he remembered the noble girl that recently became Eliza's new bodyguard and companion. She's a blond girl that Ratoka often sees hanging around the barracks after his training is over, twirling her spear.

She's more skilled than anyone in the army with the spear, and she makes it look freakishly easy to catch large animals when going out hunting. Because of this, the number of soldiers that call Ratoka "ojou-san" have decreased.

As Ratoka observed her behavior every day, he found that she didn't fit the image he had of a "noble" at all, either.

"All noble girls, they want to wear a brand new dress every day……" Ratoka heard the sister's nostalgic voice in the back of his mind. Even though he hasn't heard that voice in two years, he still remembers it clearly – rather, he can't forget it.

Four years ago, when the former domain lord died, the Kaldia citizens' lives slowly began returning to normal.

Two years ago, it was right after the adults had finished planting rye in spring. During a time when nobody had enough excess yet to be able to care about others' plights, suddenly a traveling group of sisters visited Cyril village.

Of course, Cyril village wasn't able to welcome the sisters due to its hardships. However, the sisters did not show any dissatisfactions towards the villagers, and remained calm while helping the villagers in their tasks, as their main goal was to travel from village to village while spreading a certain "story."

– That all the nobles, had forgotten the original work that nobles are supposed to perform. That the nobles were only abusing their authority, and enjoying luxurious lives. That what the nobles were doing was against the teachings of the church.

One young girl from among the sisters kept telling Ratoka this "story" over and over again.

While telling their "stories" about the nobles, the sisters would keep talking about the arrogance and extravagance of the nobles they've seen in their travels, and for the people of Cyril village that lived like they were in hell on earth under the former domain lord's rule, of course they would believe it all. There was nobody that didn't believe the sisters.

As a result, even now, the Cyril villagers have put their blind faith in this group of sisters. This includes Ratoka, who understood less than half of their story. Even so, it could be said that he's the one who believes in them the most of all.

Ratoka still vividly remembers the young sister in training that talked to him. Everything that the girl told him about nobles, he believes as fact about all nobles.

Because of his blind faith, that's how Ratoka used to view nobles.

At that time, Ratoka's body was filled with injuries every day, as he spent daylight begging every day, and sleeping in the shadows of people's houses at night.

If he went home, he didn't know what would happen.

His mother had fallen mentally ill, and didn't recognize Ratoka anymore.

Ratoka had black hair just like the domain lord, and red eyes just like the domain lord. The similarity was too much and his mother lost her mind. In her confusion, she couldn't even bear to look at Ratoka. Because of this, she lived in terrible fear of Ratoka.

Ratoka was always alone in Cyril village. The other villagers all avoided him. To Ratoka, he didn't know why his mom and the villagers hated and feared him so much.

Ratoka doesn't have a father. His mother had gotten pregnant with Ratoka when she was forced into sex service as a "laborer" by the previous domain lord.

When her belly had gotten too big to do anything else and she was returned to her hometown village, Ratoka's mother had already lost her sanity. She didn't know where she was anymore, or who the father of her child was.

Also, there was a rule from the previous domain lord that any boys that "laborers" gave birth to would be killed. If this wasn't done, the domain lord said he would have the entire village killed.

While the "laborers" was forced into sex service all over the place, the only common point was that they all served the nobility. – Meaning, any children they had would probably be the scions of nobility. Girls were fine, but boys weren't allowed to be born.

So with fear of the punishment hanging over their heads, the villagers would be forced to make her give up her newborn child, if it was a boy.

However, Ratoka's mother was already out of her mind. Without even calling for a midwife, she gave birth alone.

She ended up giving birth to twins. The girl had died in childbirth, but the boy was still living.

Ratoka's mother was hugging the baby girl's dead body when she was discovered. And so, the villagers concealed the information about Ratoka's birth from the domain lord. He led a discrete life in a small, run-down house with his mother until news of the domain lord's death finally reached Cyril village five years ago.

“Ratoka” is actually a girl’s name, probably meant for his deceased twin sister. Ratoka’s mother never did prepare a boy’s name for her son.

After news of the domain lord’s death reached her, Ratoka’s mother got even worse mentally.

Ratoka was no longer able to withstand the way his mother always abused him, so that’s why he escaped outside of his home.

Then, he became more well-known in the village.

Although the villagers had decided not to kill him as the domain lord would have wanted, just the circumstances of his birth alone made the villagers want to avoid him.

Although his mother temporarily got better again for two years, she finally relapsed again. She had gone so insane to the point where she no longer recognized her son that everyone had taken great care to help her hide and bring up.

Ratoka would just wander around the outskirts of the village every day and look at the ground listlessly. And while walking, Ratoka would think about how haggard and hungry he was getting. His mother, who had once been his entire world to him, was now trying to harm him.

“-Why are you walking with your head down like that? You should watch where you’re going, or it could be dangerous, you know.”

The first time when he heard that clear and energetic voice, Ratoka didn’t think that she was talking to him.

When outside his home, he felt like he was just a ghost to everyone. At that point in time, he wanted to interact with someone else more than anything at all.

“-Hey, are you alright?”

Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he was so surprised when he turned around that his heart almost suddenly stopped. A girl that was only slightly taller than he was, was looking straight at him with eyes the color of the dawn sky.

Ratoka opened his eyes that resembled the color of fire.

The light coming in from the window woke Ratoka up out of his light sleep instantly. When he opened his eyes, he found that his room was being dyed a vermillion scarlet by the setting sun.

……He must have fallen asleep right after the day's training.

He tried to work his mind that didn't seem to want to wake up quite yet. He felt like he had just went to bed, so he must have fallen asleep. His body does feel a little lighter now, so he turned his back to the sunset.

Outside his room, in the cafeteria's direction, he could hear the commotion of soldiers having fun chatting.

With the muffled sounds coming through the walls, and thinking about the relationships that others have with him, Ratoka bit his lip in frustration.

He loves the dawn sunrise, and hates evening sunsets.

Maybe it's also because that he's not with everyone else, while listening to others have fun through the wall, that he would recall such a lonely memory.

Whenever he returned home to his insane mother's run-down house, he would always have a mix of emotions that felt like muddy sludge in him, as he walked back slowly. Whenever he heard lively sounds from other houses of people having fun, even that was quite a blow to Ratoka's weak spirit back then.

Even if he calls for his mother she wouldn't even look at him, Ratoka felt so jealous of others, sad, and mentally exhausted.

Anyone is fine, talk to me about anything, see me, make me feel like I exist – that's what Ratoka desired back then, as soon as possible.

And so, the first person to grant his wish, and would talk to him about various things on the nobility, was the young sister in training with reddish blue eyes the color of the dawn sky. For that reason, that's why Ratoka believed in her blindly.

Ratoka sighed deeply in an attempt to drive away his loneliness and old memories, and Ratoka looked up at the wall that was lit up by the setting sun.

Dusk in the Kaldia domain lasts for only a short time. The vermillion scarlet that dyed the room earlier, was getting imperceptibly darker and darker.

Rather than the color of the girl with eyes the color of the dawn sky, this color reminds him more of the red eyes of that daughter of the domain lord. And, her dead father, the former domain lord.

Suddenly, he wondered about the color of his own eyes. Red eyes are extremely rare, and his eye color is the exact same shade as Eliza's.

Chapter 59
The same name, Part 3

(Translator note: Since Igor, a soldier that died in the battle at Fort Jugfena, appears in this chapter, this means that these chapters take place before the battle in the story's timeline. Ratoka was mentioned before as having been sent off to the army for training, after all. Rest in peace, Igor, we hardly knew you…… Also, on the topic of arcs, I took a look ahead, and the school arc finally begins, in Chapter 143. Just for the curious that were wondering if a school arc would ever happen in this story.)

"Oi, you're up?"

A voice suddenly spoke up from the half-open door to Ratoka's room, catching his attention instantly. Turning to look, he saw a sturdy-looking middle-aged man walk into his room.

He's also tall and on the thin side, and probably gives off the impression of being too weak to be a soldier, but he's the longest serving member of the Kaldia army, that all the other soldiers look up to and go for advice.

The soldier crinkled his crow's feet wrinkles slightly at Ratoka. The light of the red sunset shone on him and he cast only a dim shadow.

"Good, since I was about to come wake you up. Claudia-sama hunted some monster meat today. Right now, everyone's cooking it up. You should come have some as well, that's why I'm here to wake you up," the soldier invited Ratoka to eat. While still remaining on his bed, Ratoka just looked at him blankly.

What exactly was the soldier saying, Ratoka didn't understand. Although he understands each word individually, but he didn't understand them together as a whole.

"……What's the matter? Are you not feeling well?"

He started worrying about how Ratoka was doing, and walked next to Ratoka's bed. When the soldier reached out his hand with a worried look on his face, Ratoka shook his head hurriedly.

"That's, not it……"

The soldier watched Ratoka's confusion for a few seconds. Then, he smiled softly.

He suddenly picked Ratoka up in his arms, and started walking with him without saying anything. Ratoka didn't say anything either. He was so frozen up in surprise at what was going on, that his voice wouldn't come out.

"I'll bring you over."

The soldier carried Ratoka to the cafeteria, where almost all the other soldiers were currently gathered. The barracks cafeteria was constructed with plenty of room, enough to hold one hundred people, but seemed slightly empty since there weren't enough soldiers in the barracks to fill the cafeteria up.

"Oi, as expected of the old man!"

"Oh my, wow, to carry the ojou-san here in your arms, this must be the wisdom of age."

"Hey, you shouldn't tease children like that. If you keep treating him like that you don't know what could happen, he might do something stupid!"

While being carried like this, Ratoka heard all kinds of comments coming from around him, until a calm voice admonished the soldiers.

– Since he was so embarrassed, and couldn't deal with it, Ratoka hid his face in the shoulders of the soldier carrying him.

The soldier patted Ratoka in order to soothe him.

All Ratoka could think about was that the soldiers would surely ridicule him for the state he's in now. What will they say about him. They'll probably say he's just a small kid?

However, contrary to his expectations, the soldiers didn't make fun of him, and remained silent. Ratoka had definitely thought they would all laugh coarsely at him, and seeing all the soldiers so quiet like this shocked him.

He lifted his head slightly, and took a look at the soldiers. Just then, someone offered him a skewer of cooked monster meat, and he couldn't help but blink.

"This is for you."

The young soldier holding the meat out to Ratoka was averting his eyes, and Ratoka hesitantly finally took the meat on the skewer that was being offered to him. It's also a bigger piece of meat than what any of the other soldiers have, which made Ratoka even more puzzled as to why he was the one getting it.

"There's no mistake, this is for you, hurry up and eat it. Since you haven't been eating dinner, right?"

Since Ratoka held the skewer for too long without eating even though his stomach was growling, the young soldier got impatient with him. Reflexively, Ratoka couldn't help but hold up the skewer like a weapon. The young soldier immediately jumped away from him.

"Man, there's really no helping some people."

While watching their exchange, the middle-aged soldier holding on to Ratoka smiled wryly.

"Honestly. All of you, making such a big fuss over one brat."

Hearing such words coming from close to him, Ratoka was getting more and more shocked. When he looked in the opposite direction, it was Gunther who just made that comment. Looking at him, Gunther had his usual scowl and was furrowing his eyebrows like usual.

"Ahh, Gunther's dirty mouth hasn't improved at all since he was teaching Charlie."

"Rather than improvement, I think it could be getting worse. Charlie wouldn't give up no matter how much she was ridiculed, this brat's not like that at all."

Ratoka realized that the two adult soldiers were talking about him, and he hid his face. However, was the domain lord's daughter also ridiculed by the soldiers like this during her training, he was somewhat surprised inside.

Even though the ugly feeling of hatred would always appear every time he thought about her, this time he felt an entirely different type of emotion swirling about inside him like mist.

That was what surprised Ratoka the most so far that day.

That mist-like feeling, didn't disappear from Ratoka's mind that day, but rather kept increasing inside him. He still hates the former domain lord's daughter. However, he's also beginning to feel a mystery feeling towards her now that keeps increasing in strength.

Also, the slight murderous intent he used to have towards Eliza was fading. Ratoka didn't understand what was happening with his own feelings.

Ever since Ratoka had monster meat together with everyone, the soldiers began saying positive things about Ratoka as well. It's because it was the oldest veteran soldier that everyone respects had taken Ratoka out of his room to eat with all the soldiers. After the veteran soldier admonished everyone else, the soldiers' treatment of Ratoka had indeed gotten much better.

In the first place, the soldiers couldn't help but keep comparing Ratoka to Eliza, mostly because they didn't understand that Eliza was actually much more mature for her age and smarter than any normal child. So when Earl Terejia had Ratoka put into the barracks and told the soldiers to train him as well, of course they would treat him the same way, none of them knowing any other children.

So even though the soldiers were clumsy and inexperienced with children, although they had treated Ratoka the same as Eliza up until now, they were learning that the two of them should be treated differently, which caused a rapid change in the soldiers' actions and words that greatly confused Ratoka.

It started from little things. Just greetings between the soldiers and Ratoka, even though everyone still acted nervous around each other at first.

Ratoka remained in a state of perpetual confusion at all the changes around him. Each time he exchanged greetings with the soldiers though, his irritation towards them seemed to disappear bit by bit.

It started with breakfast. The young soldiers sitting close to him in the cafeteria would make conversation with Ratoka. And, apart from Gunther still insulting him, the soldiers would begin giving him words of encouragement. They would complain about the former domain lord together, grumble about the severity of everyone's training menu, tell stories about everyone's hometowns and families, Ratoka gradually got to know the soldiers better.

There were quite a lot of shocking stories that the soldiers had to tell.

For example, a lot of them were former bandits, that hated the former domain lord just as much as Ratoka did. Since Ratoka couldn't comprehend why they didn't hate the domain lord's daughter Eliza as well, he couldn't sleep well at all on the night he first learned this.

He heard all about how the soldiers had treated Eliza pretty terribly as well when she first entered the barracks. Ratoka learned that in fact, the toll it took on her body from Gunther's training seems to have been even worse than what Ratoka received, and the insults were just as bad as well.

"Oh, you're here. Ratoka~"

After marching training, Ratoka was sitting down resting in the shade of a tree, when he heard someone calling his name.

"Paulo."

"That was pretty tiring. You alright?"

A boy with fluffy, wavy blonde hair sat down next to Ratoka. His name's Paulo, and he's the second youngest member of the Kaldia army, older than Ratoka by only a few years.

Maybe it's because they're the closest in age, Ratoka talks the most with Paulo. Or rather, it could be said that Paulo's extremely outgoing. This is actually the first time that they've talked during a break though, but Paulo's relaxed attitude like this was just natural made Ratoka forget that fact and his self-consciousness.

“I’m fine……”

Although he is tired from the training, he’s sitting down here more to get away from the heat. Since it’s the middle of summer right now, this is the hottest time of year in the Kaldia domain.

When Paulo who was worried about Ratoka heard him complain about the heat, Paulo raised his eyebrows slightly. It seems that Paulo’s really strong against the heat, and even after the training was over, he thought nothing of it.

“I see. Then, want to grab lunch together with me?”

“Mmm…… I want to cool off here a little bit longer.”

The sunlight coming down was so dazzling, that he was hesitant about stepping out from the shade. Ratoka’s skin is rather white and sensitive to heat, so he’s not good at dealing with it, so he’d rather relax in the tree’s shade compared to eating lunch. In the first place, he doesn’t feel hungry right now.

“Oi you, you alright?”

Another two people showed up, this time it was the oldest soldier in the army along with one of the younger soldiers walking unsteadily.

“Calvin-san, Igor-san.”

Although Ratoka felt it was too bothersome to even open his mouth, Paulo greeted both of them for him. The soldier named Calvin is the one that held on to Ratoka and brought him out to the cafeteria that one time. The one trudging along slowly behind him is Igor, a young soldier who is Ratoka’s roommate now. They both smiled happily as they entered the shade, and held out some large cups to Ratoka and Paulo.

“Make sure you guys stay hydrated.”

Ratoka silently took the cup of water.

Paulo and Calvin are the two soldiers that Ratoka is the friendliest with now. It’s mostly because of age for Paulo, and because Calvin brought Ratoka out of his room to the cafeteria and defended him that one time. Well, Ratoka’s roommate Igor has been looking after him as well.

Ratoka gulped down his water. He definitely feels a lot better now after drinking it.

“Thank you very much.”

Ratoka lowered his head to thank the two people standing in front of him. Then, Igor reached a hand out to pull Ratoka off the ground.

“……If we don’t go soon, they’ll stop serving lunch at the cafeteria.”

Ratoka was almost about to reflexively say that he doesn’t feel hungry right now, but he stopped himself from saying anything. He definitely would have said that in irritation last month, but why weren’t those words leaving his mouth right now, he wondered.

He looked at Paulo who was still standing in the shade. Even though Ratoka had said before that he didn’t feel hungry and to leave him alone, Paulo still insisted on having lunch together.

Before, he probably would have just stayed here in the shade alone. After all, if he went to get lunch, he would just have to suffer through insults like “if you can’t move, want me to carry you?”

For Ratoka, who had always wanted to interact with others, having to live together with others in the barracks and get along with everyone was slowly beginning to heal his spirit, and return him back to normal.

Now that he’s actually being treated as a child of his age, he’s no longer taking things out on others, and the heavy feelings of hatred he had toward Eliza were beginning to fade.

Chapter 60
The same name, Part 4

Since the summer heat is getting milder now in the evening and Ratoka didn't eat too much at lunch since he wasn't hungry, Ratoka wondered if he should give hunting a try for once.

He has no hunting or gathering experience at all. He feels that if he tries his best he should at least be able to get something, and although his thinking is rather shortsighted, for the first time ever, at any rate this afternoon Ratoka is about to go foraging.

"Ratoka, what are these?"

"This should be fine to eat if it's cooked over a fire. ……Ah, this red plant, I'm going to dig it up. Only its roots are edible."

In the forest belonging to the area under direct control, Ratoka was carefully gathering plants.

Since other soldiers also gather plants on a regular basis, the army has quite a lot of knowledge on what plants are edible in this domain. The Kaldia domain also has some plants unique to it that can't be found anywhere else.

By the way, Ratoka chose to gather plants for his first food collecting expedition. Since the army didn't want to let him go by himself, for Ratoka's safety Paulo was accompanying him, and they've entered the forest together for Ratoka to gather plants. Although Paulo did try to stop him, Ratoka paid him no attention as he'd already made up his mind.

That's because there's some plants that only Ratoka knows as well.

The sister in training that Ratoka knew for only a short time while she was staying in Cyril village, had taught Ratoka more than just about the nobility. Since Ratoka's

mother wasn't working, Ratoka was always going hungry, so the young sister had taught Ratoka about various wild plants.

Which leaves and fruits are inedible, which plants are poisonous, which seeds can be eaten and which can't, there's quite a lot of types of plants in Kaldia that are inedible.

Knowledge of wild plants has been passed down over the generations by the sisters, as they've traveled through all the many different parts of Arxia, and they must know how to find their own food as many places are too poor to provide additional food for the sisters.

"Ratoka, what are these?"

"……I don't know. The ones I don't recognize, it's probably better not to touch them."

"Got it. ……I don't gather plants too often myself."

Paulo had been holding out some type of five-leaved plant to Ratoka, a plant he's never seen before. Well, Ratoka only learned eight different types of plants from the sister in training, so he's actually not that knowledgeable about plants overall.

Although Paulo learned the poisonous plants since the army hammered that knowledge into him, he doesn't know the rest of them too well. Ratoka didn't have any detailed instructions given to him or knowledge on how to gather plants either, and on top of all that Paulo has to check Ratoka's plants to make sure they're not poisonous, so this has all been very time consuming.

"Well, that's how it is. ……Let's go hunting tomorrow, instead of gathering plants."

Ratoka's plant gathering with Paulo's assistance had rather low efficiency. He understands that as well, but rather than saying it out loud, he could only softly offer an alternative. Paulo just nodded and smiled wryly at Ratoka's words. Paulo also understood what Ratoka didn't dare to say out loud.

After they finally gathered a decent amount, Ratoka and Paulo returned to the barracks as fast as they could. Since Ratoka's not used to foraging, the heat's still making him more tired than usual and he's barely able to move. They sat down in a

corner of the cafeteria, and drank down some water for their parched throats while dealing with the plants they gathered.

As he silently removed roots, stems, or flowers and other such inedible parts from the plants he picked, or performed other chores like hollowing the seeds out from the fruits, Ratoka was reminded of Elise.

Come to think of it, he hasn't been visiting that gentle girl recently due to the summer heat. His training has been increased to the point where he no longer has any extra strength to spare, on top of all this unending summer heat, he always goes straight back to the barracks after training to rest now.

Now that he thinks on it, it was really sudden that he stopped visiting her. He didn't tell her beforehand that his training was going to get busier, and the temperature has gotten higher as well, so Ratoka hasn't been visiting Elise at all.

Since Ratoka hasn't shown his face there for a while, he wondered what she thought. Since it's Elise, she's probably worried about him. Maybe she'll think that something happened to him.

At the same time that he worried about what she would think, there was also some anxiety swirling about inside him.

What if, she didn't care about him at all. Ratoka's hand that was busy dealing with the plants suddenly stopped.

Whenever he visited, Elise would smile and laugh happily with him. She would look him in the eyes, tell silly stories, and they would laugh together.

He'd always been alone in the village, and until Ratoka's time in the barracks, Elise and Eliza were the only people to have ever looked him in the eyes.

When he'd just come to the barracks, since the soldiers were endlessly insulting him, Ratoka would always avoid looking at them.

He decided to go and visit Elise. Some of the seeds he just peeled, he'll take some over to her as a present too. Since he hasn't been to see Elise for so long, he needs to make up for it somehow.

He's really scared of Elise coming to dislike him.

He picked some seeds that had a slightly sweet taste to them, they're the best tasting ones from among the plants that Ratoka knows.

If Elise happens to like them, if she's happy, then maybe she'll come to like him more. While thinking such things, Ratoka carefully pared the next fruit.

Meeting someone's eyes normally, and having a nice conversation with them. It's something that he's never experienced before, something he's always wanted but was so far out of his reach, being all alone by himself with no one to talk to, he never wants to be like that again. Even listening to insults, although not pleasant, is slightly better.

Those were Ratoka's desires from the bottom of his heart. He doesn't even think life in the barracks is that bad now, because nobody from the soldiers tries to avoid or ignore Ratoka.

Why is it then that, even though Elise is always agreeable and nice to him, why is he so worried about going to see her.

Ratoka's hand stopped again. He wondered again why he was so worried. He tried relaxing himself, in search of the answer.

– If possible, he wants someone to think about him. Since his mother's no longer sane, she doesn't even recognize him anymore. He wants something else in exchange. Anyone is fine. He wants to be the most important person to someone, although he doesn't want to say that out loud.

He just wants someone to worry about him.

……He clarified his own wish to himself, realizing just how much he wanted it, and immediately after, Eliza's icy expression came to mind for some reason, with unknown feelings that clogged his throat.

Just what does she intend to do with him.

Eliza stole Ratoka's freedom and name from him. He has to go by a fake name at her mansion, and she basically forced him into the barracks as a member of her army.

Just what is going to happen to him.

Is he going to suffer a fate even worse than death?

……To him, the worst fate possible would be to cut him off from everyone, leaving him all alone.

At the very thought, he shuddered, feeling discomfort and fear all over his body.

Ratoka shook his head to clear his feelings, picked up the seeds again, and immersed himself in simple repetitive work to keep busy.

Chapter 61
The same name, Part 5

The next day, Ratoka dragged his heavy feeling body even though he felt exhausted and slightly sick, and brought some of the seeds he picked yesterday with him to meet Elise.

The seeds Ratoka had were about the size of his hand, and they were pinkish in color. While they can't be eaten raw, they're really sweet and delicious if they're boiled.

Certain plants are good for recovering body strength when eaten, Ratoka remembered the sister that had taught him those words. Since Elise has a weak body, he thinks they'll be perfect for her.

While sticking to the shadows as much as possible to avoid the heat, Ratoka wondered if Elise would still be expecting him, since he hasn't visited her in so long.

However, when he arrived at the garden, he saw Elise looking down from her window with a dejected expression on her face, and his heartbeat increased rapidly.

"Elise-sama!"

He rushed towards her window and called out her name, and when Elise noticed Ratoka, her expression was one of surprise and joy.

"Elise-sama!"

The greeting he got in return was the exact same as his. Even though he used to hate it so much, maybe it's because of Elise's overjoyed expression, Ratoka didn't even mind that one bit anymore. Although it's annoying that Eliza changed his name on her own, when Ratoka thinks that it's Elise's name, he doesn't mind so much anymore.

"I'm sorry, I didn't even say anything…… and I didn't come to visit."

“No, don’t worry about it. ……Since you haven’t been to see me, I was worried. I wondered if something happened to you……”

Her relief at seeing him alright was evident to see, and her dazzling smile caused Ratoka to feel a prick of guilt inside his chest. He made Elise worry about him, and that he also doubted whether Elise would worry about him, that was causing him to feel guilty, so once again he lowered his head and apologized.

Then, he held out his gift in an attempt to make himself feel better.

“Um, this. I gathered it for you.”

He grasped the seeds tightly while his heart started beating faster again. Since Elise’s room is on the second floor, he’s going to have to toss them up to her.

What if she said she doesn’t need such a thing, his heart was pounding. After all, she’s still a noble. What if she doesn’t like these seeds, that even most commoners don’t bother looking at.

While Ratoka was waiting nervously, Elise tilted her head in confusion. Then, to the shivering Ratoka, Elise asked a question in wonder.

“Gathering? Er, what’s that mean?”

It was such an unexpected response, that Ratoka’s brain could no longer process what was going on.

“Ah, ……Eh?”

Ratoka could only reply in a goofy voice, and look at Elise blankly. Silence fell for a moment between them.

She had asked, what’s that mean. That’s what he had heard, and although Ratoka took five deep breaths, he still couldn’t understand her question at all, which couldn’t be helped.

Some things Ratoka would consider normal in order to survive as a child, however, normally nobles don’t make food for themselves, and on top of that, Elise has always been sickly and grew up confined inside, so Elise has basically no common sense about everyday life at all.

– Suddenly, giggling could be heard from within her room. At hearing it, Ratoka's back became stiff.

When Ratoka had been put into the barracks, he'd forgotten that he was told to not come to the mansion. Although it should seem obvious, the mansion is for nobles to live in. As a commoner, he basically shouldn't even be allowed close to here, Ratoka began to remember that fact.

That was another reason he stuck to the shadows in the first place when coming here, Ratoka just remembered. Although, there was no guarantee that someone else wouldn't be with Elise.

"What is it, Maya. Why are you laughing like that?"

"……Nothing, ojou-sama. It's just that, I'm sure that your friend Elise-sama must be very shocked. Excuse me."

While Ratoka remained completely frozen, Elise started talking again without paying it any mind. The other voice answered Elise calmly.

"Various plants and fruits are edible, and can be harvested and picked, this is called gathering. When Eliza-sama was telling you stories about her time in the barracks, surely she mentioned this as well?"

"Yes, indeed. ……So that's what gathering meant."

Because she understood, Elise smiled happily in satisfaction and turned back to Ratoka. Ratoka instantly smiled in return as well, but he knew that his cheek was still twitching.

That person in Elise's room, must have already known of Ratoka coming to visit many times already. That person must have always remained silent every time he came to visit. He wondered if she was always listening to their conversations in secret.

He had always thought that these nice, peaceful conversations belonged to him and Elise alone. And, Ratoka had also felt like there was something even sacred about it.

Ratoka was – at this moment, his cheek kept twitching, and complex emotions filled his entire head.

Elise is a noble. Surely nobles must be accustomed to having someone else listen in on their conversations, it must be natural to them.

She didn't know what the word gathering meant, and this was normal to Elise as well, meaning to her, Ratoka hasn't said or done anything bad at all.

However, she had been so different from his image of a noble. That she really is a "noble" after all, he feels like he's suddenly being confronted with that fact. An impression that still remains deep within Ratoka, of a "noble" that the sister with dawn-colored eyes despises.

"What's the matter?"

Elise was looking down at Ratoka again, tilting her head in wonder.

"-No, thing? I'm fine?"

Their standing positions relative to each other by height, seemed as if to reflect the power relationship between them as well, and Ratoka gently looked away from Elise.

Chapter 62
The same name, Part 6

Since he hadn't visited Elise in so long, looking for a reason to tell her, before he realized it all Ratoka let spill that "training has gotten more difficult so I've been too busy to come," not being able to come up with anything else.

A heavy feeling, like mud, was stuck in his chest.

In Ratoka's mind, three girls kept appearing and disappearing, changing places with each other.

"Nobles are so terrible. While the villagers are in terrible condition, they live a good life, and play around happily every day." The sister with dawn-colored eyes and her faint smile was then replaced by Elise's fleeting smile which turned into her sadly shaking her head.

Then, after them, the icy expression of Eliza and her blood-red eyes, and the words she said to him from across the bars of his cell that one day, kept coming to his mind.

"A country's laws, are there to protect its people. That would include the nobility as well. The nobility aren't regular people, they're the gears that move this country. ……If foolish people forget that and try to hurt others, this country could be destroyed. Such as my father."

And so, they just kept switching and swapping, replacing each other in his mind, continuing endlessly, Ratoka's mind was going funny.

Of course, this would affect his ability to concentrate and his physical abilities.

The wooden sword in his hands was knocked away with great force, and the next thing he knew Ratoka found himself on the ground. It happened so fast, that Ratoka didn't understand what was going on until the pain in his back started setting in.

"Oi, you're not into it today."

Ratoka remained blankly stunned for a while, before his voice crawled along the ground and reached a sullen Gunther.

“It hurts.”

Gunther kicked him lightly in the head, then grabbed Ratoka by the back of his shirt and forcibly raised him off the ground.

“What are you doing!!”

“……”

Even though Gunther was being rather rough and bellowing angrily at him, all that he got back from Ratoka was a blank look. Gunther glared at Ratoka, and Ratoka flinched.

“……That’s enough for today.”

“Eh?”

“Just do what you like until the marching training.”

Gunther left with only those words, and quickly departed from the training grounds.

“……What was all that.”

Ratoka’s wooden sword that was knocked out of his hands with great force, had flown farther than it ever had before.

While Paulo smeared some medicine on his back for him, Ratoka just dazedly looked at the fields. He watched the wheat swaying in the light breeze.

“What’s the matter today? You seem to be spacing out.”

“……Mm? Ahh……”

Ratoka barely responded to Paulo who was worried about him, and couldn't stop himself from thinking about the three girls that were still in his mind.

Although he really wanted it all to stop and for the girls to go away, Ratoka himself did realize that it was all a manifestation of his own confusion.

The girl that had taught him his entire sense of values.

The girl most important to him right now.

And, the person he hates the most.

He didn't know who to trust or believe in, Ratoka was completely lost in confusion.

His emotions hadn't matured yet. Since he had a twisted upbringing, that distorted his emotional development. Thus, his emotional maturity is even less than average for someone his age.

Dealing with all these new thoughts and emotions, caused him great confusion.

It just went round and round inside him but he couldn't come up with any answers, so Ratoka, still with his blank expression, asked Paulo behind him.

"……Hey. Nobles are terrible people, right?"

Many of the army's soldiers had been forced into banditry because of the former domain lord, so they hate, loathe, and despise him. And, that should also extend to his wife and children. His wife had a mansion in the royal capital, and hardly ever stayed in her own domain, their children were fat and ugly, and they seemed to enjoy bullying and torturing the people in their own domain.

But, why does that not include Eliza, the only survivor.

"……What do you mean? Although the previous domain lord was indeed terrible, Earl Terejia has been helping us."

Paulo replied after thinking for a little bit.

"Claudia-sama is a really good person as well. She's nice, very fun to be around with, and not arrogant at all."

With Paulo's words, Ratoka recalled the beautiful girl with long blonde hair. He's never spoken to her, but he's seen her around many times. She's Eliza's personal attendant and bodyguard, that's all Ratoka knows. If he wasn't obedient in the barracks, maybe he would have seen her more directly.

"As for Eliza-sama…… I wonder. I would definitely hate her if she was a terrible noble like her father, but she was brought up by Earl Terejia, and I think it's good that she does think about her people properly. Claudia-sama says that Eliza-sama is a good person, and the other soldiers all give her their recognition as well, so I think I can say she's a good noble?"

Just as Paulo finished summing up his thoughts, he finished applying medicine on Ratoka's back and stood up.

"Well, if you're anxious, come to see for yourself."

"Eh?"

Paulo said it very frankly, and Ratoka couldn't help but think on his words. See for yourself, he said, but Eliza generally doesn't come out from her mansion. Besides, since Paulo is also only a soldier in training, it should be almost impossible for him to get close to Eliza as well.

"Don't worry about it, it's nothing bad. You just have to come with us when we deploy to Fort Jugfena."

"……Deploy?"

It was such an unexpected word, that Ratoka could only repeat it dazedly.

Fort Jugfena would mean the country's border.

It's considered the most dangerous place in Arxia, bordering the unfriendly country of Densel, it's a place where people must be prepared for death – although Ratoka actually didn't know those things, he did somewhat understand what it meant to have to deploy troops there.

However, rather than that, more important to Ratoka right now was that Paulo would be leaving the barracks.

“-Is there going to be war?”

The words that finally came out of Ratoka, weren’t the ones he wanted to say the most. If Paulo is leaving, Ratoka wants to come along as well, but he couldn’t say it.

In the worst case scenario, Paulo might not ever return again. And so, Ratoka couldn’t bring himself to say goodbye to Paulo.

“No, I don’t think it’ll be to that extent. Because there’s some sort of uprising in the neighboring country close to Arxia, I’ve heard that we’re only heading over there to increase security. Our domain is going to take in some refugees, have you heard?”

Ratoka had indeed heard about the domain accepting refugees. The soldiers that had formerly captured Ratoka, were now all living together with him and had told him about the refugees.

“In our domain, because of the previous lord, there’s not enough population it seems? I don’t know whether Earl Terejia or Eliza-sama thought of it, but it seems that one of them decided to accept the refugees in order to help rebuild the domain and promote economic development. Having to take responsibility for that, that’s probably why soldiers have to be deployed to Fort Jugfena. Maybe some other domains also wanted to accept the refugees, some domains seem to have opposed it as well, either way, our domain won’t be able to sit things out.”

Without them realizing it, Calvin had come up next to them holding a plate of food, and entered the conversation. He seems to have brought Ratoka and Paulo their lunch portions, and sat down next to them.

“According to Kamil, it was Eliza-sama that aggressively pushed for our domain to accept the refugees. Also, she was the one that came up with the countermeasures against the fire moths as well. That’s according to the people in the mansion. If that’s true, then Eliza-sama isn’t like the previous lord at all.”

As Calvin continued his story in an admonishing tone of voice, Ratoka only muttered “you don’t know that yet.” Calvin simply agreed calmly.

“That’s right. I don’t know what Eliza-sama will become like in the future. But right now she’s definitely working for the sake of the people. ……Also, when she was here in the barracks, she tried her best with the difficult training every day. How hard this all is, you should know best, right?”

Ratoka couldn't even nod or shake his head at Calvin who was smiling wryly at him, and could only ask him a question instead.

"Calvin…… are you also going to Fort Jugfena?"

Calvin had a blank look for a moment, then he nodded gently and smiled.

"That's right……"

The three girls had finally disappeared from Ratoka's mind, but in exchange, he had a premonition that he was going to part with the name of Ratoka and the soldiers.

He felt sadness, then a terrible sense of emptiness, Ratoka was lost for words.

Chapter 63
The same name, Part 7

20 soldiers were recalled from the construction work for building a new village for the incoming refugees, while Earl Terejia's personal troops would replace them, and Eliza would lead her domain's soldiers to Fort Jugfena.

Before the soldiers returned, Ratoka was returned to the mansion. Ratoka felt a lump in his chest at having to separate from Paulo, Calvin, and the other soldiers.

Just like before, Ratoka had the room in the farthest back of the mansion, although this time he wasn't confined like last time. The chains would no longer be used on him.

When he returned, Bellway who he knew slightly immediately took him to meet two adults.

One of them was Mrs. Marshan, who was introduced to him as the current governess and who would begin giving him a proper education. The other person was a tall, slender man, who was to begin teaching him the rapier. It seems that usually they teach Eliza as well.

Although his time in the barracks had given Ratoka the foundation of what he needed for basic physical fitness, his studying and swordsmanship skills hadn't kept up.

Although he wasn't throwing up like the time right after he entered the barracks, due to Ratoka's mental fatigue and impatience with his learning not going well, combined with him wondering why he was being forced to learn all this, three weeks after he returned to the mansion, Ratoka was already sick of life there.

Unlike at the barracks, Ratoka got to sleep in a soft bed, and received three good meals a day that were prepared for him. Even so, Ratoka felt that the barracks were better.

At the very least, he was able to talk with Paulo and Calvin there every day. He was also allowed to be called Ratoka there.

Now, he's being swamped with work by the lessons given to him from his two teachers, so he barely gets to go out from his room, so he's feeling lonely and fatigued every day. It was only natural and couldn't be helped that Ratoka would feel this way.

Even so, his teachers would keep telling him "Eliza completed these lessons successfully with hard work and effort," and feeling like he was being challenged, Ratoka kept working on his lessons.

He believed what his two teachers were telling him since Calvin had also told him the same thing, that Eliza had started out knowing nothing just like she did, and that she completed everything successfully through only her own efforts. Anyways, basically Ratoka's pride did not allow him to give up on things that she was capable of doing.

Ratoka was also recognizing that nobles needed to work hard on learning many things, and he was realizing that his previous view that "nobles live a good life and play around happily every day" may have been mistaken.

That's why, Ratoka chased after Eliza. He wants to be able to do the things she can, and say "that was so simple, I didn't even need to put in any effort."

"Well then, Elise-sama, today I shall be giving a lecture on nobility and the law."

"……I'll be in your care."

At first, he was taught polite speech and etiquette, along with how to read and write words, and now he's finally being taught subject matters, one month after he returned to the mansion.

On top of the desk in front of him, Ratoka saw a rectangular object that he's never seen before, and he touched it nervously.

"Is this what's called a book?"

The rectangular object had many papers bundled inside it, filled with the characters that he had been learning, there was nothing other than the characters he was learning on the papers.

There were no blank spaces, and no matter where he looked, even though he recognized the characters, he didn't understand the meanings of the words at all. He had no idea what this book was about at all.

"Do you understand the contents?"

"……No."

"Of course. If you could read that all by yourself, there would be no need for lectures."

Mrs. Marshan always had a perfect smile on, and her eyes felt slightly soothing. Although the amount he had to learn still made him feel a little melancholy inside, Ratoka happily listened to Mrs. Marshan beginning to teach him about the book's contents.

He didn't have the free time to talk to anyone else out of classes, nor could he talk without permission even in the classroom, and he had to learn proper etiquette and language, Ratoka felt like he was almost drowning in his suffocation.

He really, really wanted to be able to meet with Elise. Her gentle, calming stories had become of central importance in Ratoka's heart.

While learning from Mrs. Marshan's lectures, his views on nobles were getting more and more shaken – especially his view on Eliza, which he had once thought impossible to change.

Arxia is a country that is ruled by law. Religion and law are inextricably intertwined in this country, it has been like this since its establishment.

"Law" is considered so important, that its administrators and executors are the nobles. Law is supposed to bring about order, leading to a healthy society and people. Nobles are those that protect the law and order, that's why "nobles" exist.

The first shrine priestess, Kusha Fema, spread the "law" that she obtained from the gods, and was the founder of modern society. Later, her descendant St. Ahar created the guardian of the law, the Ar Xia church, along with the country Arxia that lives by the church's Sacred Code of laws.

Meaning, the current Arxia Kingdom is governed by “law” above all else. And, the “country’s” administrators are the nobles.

Ratoka thought back to Eliza’s words that night again. “The nobility aren’t regular people, they’re the gears that move this country……”

Even the sister with the dawn-colored eyes had affirmed those things to him before. Although, she had said that the nobles had forgotten their duties to this country, drowning themselves in pleasure.

But, if what she said was true, why were Eliza and him still learning all these things.

The absolute views on nobles that the young sister had planted deep within Ratoka, were collapsing and loudly crumbling on itself within Ratoka, each time he had his lessons and learned more from his book.

Chapter 64
The same name, Part 8

Ratoka was finally mastering the basics of the rapier.

Ratoka is a boy. As a typical young villager boy, he likes martial arts well enough.

What's more, he was even proud of himself, for being able to learn the rapier which ordinary commoners would never have the opportunity to do.

Summer was ending, so the heat and humidity were subsiding, when Ratoka heard something that made him go "why is that" involuntarily.

"Why was everything decided like this in the first place?"

The person sitting across from Ratoka, Bellway, had just told him something without an explanation like he always did.

"Your rapier training is going to end, and you're going to start learning the spear instead today. Your teacher will be Claudia-sama, you'll be learning at the training grounds, and your name with her will be Ratoka, not Elise. Also, any time that you speak with any of Earl Terejia's private troops, please call yourself Ratoka. Because I'm in charge of you, please don't give me any unnecessary trouble."

Bellway finished what he had to say, and quickly stood up and left without giving Ratoka any answers.

Even though he was allowed to use his real name for once with these people, Ratoka still felt some heavy feelings.

Why was he supposed to start learning the spear, after he had finally begun to master the rapier after all that trouble. He couldn't help but wonder about things over and over again with a heavy feeling in his heart, but couldn't come up with any answers.

In the first place, why was he even studying lessons for the nobles. Remembering that he had once thrown a stone at Eliza, Ratoka was becoming even more and more confused at her expectations for him.

She would have him executed, she said. But instead, on the day of his supposed execution, she merely had him locked up, and cut off a small lock of his hair instead.

He was provided with plain but a very ample amount of food, and was even allowed to go outside regularly. Every day, a towel to clean his body with and a hot bath was also prepared. Thanks to all this, compared to when he was in Cyril village, the skinny, grubby child that he used to be had completely disappeared, with his hair looking cleaner and healthier, his complexion looking much better, giving him a neat appearance.

If the villagers saw him now, there's no way any of them would recognize him. Everyone thought that he had been executed in that fake execution, and they had very little contact with him in the first place.

All they might remember is the color of his hair and eyes. After all, because he looked so similar to the previous domain lord, everyone avoided him even after the previous lord had died.

However, even though his appearance has changed so much, Ratoka couldn't tell himself it was "great."

He couldn't abandon parts of his appearance or his name that his mother had given him.

Even if his mother had gone insane. Even if his mother had hurt him.

– The girl's name Ratoka, the long hair that his mother had him keep like a girl's, both of those were proof to him of his mother's love.

Even though his hair used to be dirty and unhealthy, just changing it on him without his permission, and forcing him to use a different name for someone else's convenience, stealing his original name from him, of course Ratoka would feel resentment inside at all of this.

However, he was beginning to understand a little bit that this was all in order for allowing him to live on.

– Nobles are the executors of the law. The previous domain lord that had tortured his citizens was an exception, if there had been a real noble, any lawbreakers would have been the ones punished instead.

Protecting and upholding the law doesn't mean using it to one's own advantage, it applies to everyone, from commoners, to nobles and even the royalty.

That domain lord's daughter, Eliza, must have known that. Even while knowing that, she had gone around the law and allowed Ratoka to live.

He should have been executed according to the law, but even so, Eliza had broken the law and allowed him to live, this is such a serious matter.

What's more, Ratoka had been caught throwing a rock at Eliza, and had even told her he wanted her dead. Breaking the law to keep Ratoka alive, she gains nothing from it, and it could even be detrimental to her.

People like Ratoka that resent the previous lord's only surviving family member, Eliza, aren't rare at all. What if someone else throws a rock just like Ratoka did, is she going to spare them just like him, he wondered.

When he thought about all this, even though he still hates her, he saw a glimpse of a truly heavy burden on her tiny shoulders.

Bellway took Ratoka to the training grounds that he hasn't visited for a long time, and he saw some soldiers he didn't know around the place. They weren't wearing old battered leather armor like the domain's army, but were wearing metal armor instead.

"Bellway-sama, who's this kid……?"

"He's an orphan that's going to become a soldier in training for the Kaldia army starting next spring. He's going to begin learning the spear here. I was worried that he might get lost, so I guided him here."

"I see, but surely Bellway-sama didn't have to go to all the trouble of bringing him here yourself……?"

"Everyone else in the mansion just happened to be busy at the moment. It couldn't be helped."

The soldiers that he didn't recognize came over to talk to Bellway. All these soldiers that Ratoka didn't recognize, and on top of that Bellway was lying to them right in front of him, Ratoka felt something very shady was going on.

"Since his instructor will be arriving soon, please prepare a section of the training grounds for his usage."

Before he realized it, Bellway had already just about finished talking to the soldiers, and tapped him on the shoulder, causing Ratoka to shrug and turn around, looking at the direction he indicated.

He had seen Gunther and the other soldiers use practice wooden spears before, so he wound some cloth strips around a wooden spear to pass the time, until he heard a cool mature girl's voice saying, "are you Ratorika?"

When he raised his head, he saw a beautiful blonde-haired girl. He's seen her from afar a couple times before, it's Claudia.

"Um…… It's Ratoka."

At Ratoka's response, Claudia nodded to herself in self-satisfaction.

"So it's Ratoka, sorry for getting it wrong. I'm Claudia. Pleased to be in your care."

"I'll be in your care as well."

"Ahh. Then, let's start training immediately. Let's start with twenty laps around the training grounds."

At Claudia's words that she said instantly without hesitation, Ratoka's wooden spear that he was holding slipped from his hands with a noisy clatter.

Twenty laps, that's an amount that even the adult soldiers would have trouble with.

By the way, the most that Ratoka has ever managed up until now has been eight laps. And, she wants twenty?

"Alright, let's start."

Without paying attention to Ratoka's reaction, Claudia was telling Ratoka to hurry up and start running. Even if he takes a light pace, Ratoka felt like twenty laps was still too unreasonable?

Even so, Ratoka went along with Claudia's demand, and ran completely out of energy after fifteen laps and could run or train no more, and his first day of spear training concluded earlier than expected.

Chapter 65
The same name, Part 9

Many days later, although he was feeling fatigued, Ratoka managed to drag his heavy-feeling body to the training grounds again.

On the short path from the mansion to the training grounds, Bellway had greeted Ratoka with a “you’re going?” and hadn’t said anything else.

All the adults at the mansion are like that. They never chat about anything unnecessary. There’s only terribly businesslike brief exchanges, Ratoka felt no warmth from them at all.

Although he had been lonely in Cyril village, his loneliness had begun fading while in the barracks, so now he’s gotten to the point where he can no longer stand being ignored.

Just like yesterday, Bellway left him behind without saying anything, and Ratoka…… sighed heavily.

He wants to meet Elise so badly, and talk to her about anything at all.

There were too many things he was thinking about spinning inside his head, it’s to the point where he can’t organize his thoughts or figure out what to do.

That’s why, he wants to temporarily forget about everything.

Although that was the wish inside his heart, he knew that it was very unlikely to come true. At the very least, he wants to be able to just make some casual conversation, changing his wish to something smaller.

If nothing had changed about his life, his wishes would have never come true before. However, there’s now one more person around Ratoka than there used to be.

Claudia is still a teenager that’s easy to get along with, it might be okay to make some silly idle chatter with her.

When he thought about that, even though he was still tired from yesterday, some energy returned to him.

Ratoka who was trying to console himself a little bit, suddenly looked around him. That beautiful golden hair was nowhere to be seen in the training grounds.

Well, he'd gotten here a little early. He'll wait patiently, and Ratoka sat down against the wall.

However, after two hours passed, then another half hour, Claudia still never showed up.

Although Ratoka did figure out that something might have happened, Ratoka still stayed there waiting for her by himself, as he had nothing else to do.

In the end, Claudia never showed up to the training grounds. Since Bellway had told him not to make any trouble, Ratoka didn't move from the training grounds. He didn't know what was going on, nor could he do anything about it, all Ratoka could feel was anxiety.

Everything about Ratoka was controlled by the nobles in the mansion, he couldn't do anything by himself. The nobles have also told Ratoka nothing about anything going on.

This is the first time that Ratoka's been confronted with nobody telling him what to do. Feeling anxiety together with a strange sensation, at last Ratoka finally stood up, and headed for the exit of the training grounds.

Another thirty minutes had passed without anyone at all coming for Ratoka. He wants to take a look around to see what was going on with the abnormal situation…… hopefully he won't be scolded.

While furtively walking along the paths, come to think of it, Ratoka realized that Earl Terejia's personal troops that were usually hanging around here weren't anywhere to be seen today.

He felt more and more that something must have happened. Ratoka couldn't help but increase his pace more and more, until he started running.

He opened a door leading to the mansion, then suddenly turned around and flattened himself against the wall, as he heard many people's voices.

It seems that there's a lot of people right now in this part of the mansion. While paying careful attention to his surroundings, Ratoka stuck to the shadows and took the path to Elise's room.

With his back pressed against the wall, Ratoka carefully peeked at the entrance to the mansion. Many of the missing troops from Earl Terejia's army were gathered there. He also saw Bellway and Earl Terejia among them. This is the first time that he's seen Earl Terejia in a long time.

What's going on, Ratoka held his breath as he surreptitiously spied on them. Everyone was looking up at the sky to the east, without any signs that they were going to go anywhere else.

What exactly is going to happen in the sky over there.

Ratoka, in his curiousity, looked at the sky as well. Other than the sunset, there was nothing. Only the reddish color of the sky that Ratoka hates.

It all seemed slightly ridiculous, everyone was staring into the dazzling sunset. Then, finally, a small black speck appeared in the sky.

Ratoka thought that it was a bird of some sort, until it got bigger and bigger as it approached, to the point where he could even see its shadow on the ground. It definitely wasn't a bird, and he looked away from it, back at the group of people when they started making a commotion.

"Look, isn't that Rashiok?"

"……Ahh, that's definitely Rashiok!"

Ratoka tilted his head at what he heard. Rashiok? He seems to recall that name from a bedtime story that his mother used to tell him a long time ago, but can't remember the details.

Ratoka noticed that the people crowded around the entrance to the mansion were pointing at the black speck in the sky.

Then, they must be pointing to that bird. ……No wait, it's not a bird. The black figure, although it spread its wings and was flying through the sky like a bird, it was much, much larger than any bird could be.

That strange shape seems to be heading straight for here. As he kept watching it get closer, he noticed that there seemed to be a person riding on top the bird-like creature.

What exactly is that.

As Ratoka kept staring at the approaching creature out of sheer curiousity, as it kept getting closer and he was able to see it more clearly, he became completely lost for words.

He could gradually make out, what appeared to be Claudia riding on top of the creature. And, he also noticed that Claudia was holding onto someone smaller in her arms.

Her black hair was being illuminated by the evening sun, and wasn't moving in the wind. Her arms were lowered and completely limp, and Ratoka felt himself turning pale reflexively.

She's carrying Eliza. Something must have happened to her at Fort Jugfena, for her to return like that.

The moment he recognized her, Ratoka felt like his heart was being encased in ice. It was as if he was taking an icy shower in winter, his chest was so painful.

She's the girl that he once wished would die. But lately, just what exactly does he think of her.

However, if she dies now, he'll be troubled. Ratoka doesn't belong anywhere – only that girl has a use for him.

Although it's really frustrating for him to admit it, he had to face the facts. It was Eliza that spared his life, not Earl Terejia or anyone else.

As Claudia and Eliza landed on the ground, Ratoka could only watch them while frozen over, with his eyes burning.

Chapter 66
The same name, Part 10

Until the exhausted-seeming Claudia finally transported the apparently unconscious Eliza into the mansion, Ratoka's body remained rooted like a stone.

He was filled with chaotic, confused feelings inside him.

Only when Earl Terejia went inside the mansion as well, did Ratoka awkwardly start moving again.

He doesn't know when Bellway might come looking for him to pick him up. He can't come up with any good excuses, so it's best to avoid being scolded for going off on his own.

He left at a quick pace, and returned to the training grounds.

His heart was still beating painfully quickly. Eliza, Claudia, and the creature they were riding on, were all completely covered in blood. There must have been some sort of battle at Fort Jugfena. Even though everything had been completely normal this morning, he had no clue that any of this would happen.

People that he didn't know, were dying in a place he didn't know, it was still quite a bad shock to Ratoka.

What's more, Eliza has returned, which means that the soldiers that went with her to Fort Jugfena should be returning soon within a few days as well.

At thinking so, he lost all his strength in his shoulders. He tried his best to stand back up properly again, and succeeded right as he saw Bellway entering the training grounds.

"I'm sorry, I forgot about you and left you here for several hours……!"

Bellway who walked briskly up to Ratoka, appeared to be a bit unsettled and impatient. He's so different from his usual terse coldness, that Ratoka went wide-eyed in amazement.

Bellway probably realized his own state as well, he cleared his throat to calm himself down.

“Since Claudia-sama isn’t here right now, I’m terribly sorry that you came all the way out here and waited for nothing. I shall make certain that something like this does not happen again. Then, you can return for today.”

Bellway smoothly explained things away, and quickly turned around and left Ratoka, leaving him feeling terribly despondent for some reason. He just wants to hear something about what’s going on, an explanation rather than an apology.

The feeling of loneliness was casting a shadow over his heart. Ratoka ploddingly followed along after Bellway in a downcast mood.

Then, some time later, the remaining soldiers from the Kaldia army returned as well, led by Gunther.

Ratoka watched them being thanked in the garden for their service, from a window in the mansion, knowing that he would get scolded if he was discovered. In the garden that was paved with bricks of various different colors, he saw what seemed like shadows on the soldiers’ faces, and they barely ate and were quite subdued instead of dancing at the party prepared for their return, drinking alcohol instead.

As expected, with Eliza’s situation, they can’t just celebrate things.

He wondered if she was injured, she’s still shut in her bedroom.

While thinking so, Ratoka stopped looking at all the soldiers, and switched to looking for the people that took care of him in the barracks.

Since Gunther really stood out, he saw him immediately. He was surrounded by a group of soldiers, and even so his rich russet brown hair was rather conspicuous. Something about him seems to be naturally charismatic, attracting others.

For once, Calvin was sitting next to Gunther as well, relaxing.

While the other soldiers had grim expressions, Calvin still had an unruffled, calm expression. Only the soldiers close to him seemed to have somewhat relieved expressions as well.

Next, he found Paulo and stopped to look at him. He's the shortest among the soldiers, but his fluffy golden hair is really eye-catching.

Ratoka felt relief at seeing his friend healthy, and Ratoka started searching through the soldiers again.

He wondered what happened to Igor. Igor was his roommate, and they got along pretty well, he kept looking for Igor's face among the crowd – and in the end – he couldn't find him.

No matter how much he looked, he couldn't find Igor and his ordinary chestnut-colored hair. He wondered if Igor was injured and was resting in the barracks.

As he kept searching through the soldiers for Igor's location, Ratoka suddenly furrowed his brows, feeling that something was off. What is it. Something seems weird.

……While he kept looking at the soldiers, he realized what it was that he was feeling, and Ratoka felt goosebumps crawling on his skin.

There are obviously fewer soldiers than before.

There's quite a few faces familiar to Ratoka that are missing.

And, there were quite a few injured people down there at the party for them.

Sweat soon covered the palms of his hands. He shuddered out of habit.

They had gone to defend the country's borders. And, their leader Eliza, had returned covered in blood. Meaning, it was probably a battle where people had died.

Why had he thought that the shadows on their faces were related to Eliza's situation.

No wait, just like he surmised earlier, maybe the rest of them were simply in the barracks. The anxiety within Ratoka, swelled and swirled around inside.

He kept looking at the soldiers from the window.

At any rate, none of the people from the mansion are going to tell Ratoka anything about what went on with the soldiers. Then, he just has to go ask them himself.

He has to learn if the soldiers he couldn’t see in the garden, were still alive.

Chapter 67
The same name, Part 11

A night one month later, Ratoka softly opened the door to his room.

The hallways were dark as the torches had been extinguished, and the only source of light was the stars shining through the windows.

It was so silent, the even the sound of his own breathing sounded too loud to him.

Ratoka softly sneaked out of his room, and held his breath as much as possibly while carefully proceeding down the dark corridors. Everyone in the mansion was sleeping.

This is the second time that he's sneaked out of his room like this.

The night that the soldiers had returned, Ratoka had also sneaked out of his room to head for the barracks. However, he was unfortunately discovered by Bellway at that time, and he was ordered confined to his room temporarily and given a curfew.

In the end, he hasn't obtained any information, or been able to meet with Elise, all this time.

This time, so as to not be discovered, Ratoka waited until much later at night, when everyone would be asleep, even the servants.

His main goal is to be able to leave the mansion first, and he jumped out of a window on the first floor, rolling onto the ground.

Summer's already ended, and it was quite cold outside. While rubbing his arms to warm himself up, Ratoka hurried along to the barracks.

Unlike the mansion, the barracks had lights lit even at night. Ratoka also knew that someone would be on duty, awake, at all hours. At the southern entrance, there should be a single soldier posted on guard duty for the barracks.

Ratoka really wants to talk to someone and hear what's going on, so that's where he headed.

At the southern entrance, as Ratoka expected, he saw the dim outline of a soldier standing there illuminated by the candlelight.

Ratoka had been worried that it would be a soldier he didn't recognize, so he felt some relief when he saw who it was. While he was confined for one month, the remaining soldiers that had been helping construct a village for the refugees had probably returned, so the person here might not have recognized Ratoka.

Luckily, the person on guard duty here tonight was someone that had helped with Ratoka's training before. While he wasn't necessarily as close a friend as Paulo and Calvin, he wasn't someone that made fun of or had a bad relationship with Ratoka.

In order to not startle him, Ratoka slowly walked out from the dark night.

"Who's there!"

The soldier immediately drew his sword. Ratoka could see the surprise on the soldier's face in the dim candlelight, and once the soldier saw that it was Ratoka, he sheathed his sword again.

"Ratoka……?"

"Yes, that's right. It's me."

"You, where have you been? ……More importantly than that, why are you here at this time of night……?"

The soldier couldn't hide his confusion, while Ratoka felt the most relief he had in a long time. The only two people that even talk with Ratoka in the mansion are Bellway and Mrs. Marshan, and neither of them show any emotion in front of Ratoka.

At seeing more varied expressions in front of him for the first time in a long while, Ratoka relaxed his shoulders.

"Um, I'm being taken care of at a different place right now. It's been a bit strict, so I couldn't come visit except at this time. Also, everyone at the mansion, they don't tell me anything……"

"Have you come to hear about what happened to us?"

Ratoka nodded, and the soldier scratched his cheek like he was at a loss. Although he had put away his sword, it seems that he's still maintaining a minimum amount of vigilance.

"I saw you all from a distance when you returned. At that time, there were some people I couldn't see…… I was worried if they were injured, and I absolutely had to come find out. My roommate, Igor-san…… is he doing alright? Has he returned?"

So as to not appear too suspicious, Ratoka only asked the minimum of what he wanted to know. However, the soldier paled when he heard Igor's name mentioned.

The candlelight was flickering over the soldier's face that had gone white.

Ratoka clenched his lips and ground his teeth. The soldier's reaction seemed to indicate that he must know what happened to Igor.

For a while, both Ratoka and the soldier remained silent. The fall wind kept blowing on Ratoka. It made him cold, and his shoulders were shivering. The chilliness was a bit too much, and Ratoka was the first one to break the silence by sneezing. Then, the soldier finally seemed to come to his senses.

"Oi, don't catch a cold or something out here. You're wearing such light clothes……!"

"……I'm alright. Once I return, I have a warm bed I can sleep in. But, before I go back, please at the very least tell me what happened to Igor."

Ratoka looked directly into the soldier's eyes, and the soldier faltered slightly. The soldier bit his lips several times. Then, at last he sighed, and began talking softly.

"Igor, that guy died. He died at Fort Jugfena. He was ambushed from behind and stabbed in the stomach…… Richard, Dominic, Wojciech, Frederick, Joseph, they and more all died. Charlie…… Eliza-sama, seems to have gone funny in the head because Kamil died as well. All she does now is sleep……"

All the names belonged to soldiers that Ratoka knew, and Ratoka felt like blood was draining from his face, and he touched his face with trembling fingers as he was beginning to feel dizzy. The soldier seemed to be quite down as he returned to his guard post at the barracks entrance.

Ratoka couldn't say anything, and just remained frozen there for a while. Although he had known that it was a possibility, being confronted with the knowledge that people he'd known had indeed died was still a big shock to him.

On top of that, hearing that Eliza who controlled his very fate had gone funny in the head, this news made him unsteady on his feet.

He felt terribly dizzy as he tried his best to make his way back to the mansion. The soldier saw him off with an anxious feeling as he watched Ratoka's small back disappear in the darkness with an unsteady gait.

Before he realized it, Ratoka somehow managed to return to his room. His brain felt numb. He was also extremely tired, and Ratoka fell asleep in his bed.

Bellway was shaking him when Ratoka woke up. He was still lost and in a daze. His eyes felt slightly clouded and warm, almost painful. His entire body felt like it didn't want to move, it was heavy.

"Are you alright?"

He heard a cold voice with no worry in it. Ratoka shook his head slowly to clear his mind. He didn't really know if everything was really alright, but for now he has to clear his thoughts first and deny that anything's wrong.

"Is something the matter?"

"……No. Everything's fine."

Ratoka shook his head more strongly than before, and Bellway looked at Ratoka as if trying to pierce through him. It's such a cold gaze, Ratoka involuntarily recoiled.

"……Come to think of it, I guess you're still a child……"

Bellway muttered that to himself. Ratoka didn't hear what he said, and just kept staring at him blankly.

Ratoka met Bellway's eyes again as he was furrowing his eyebrows, and Ratoka hurriedly lowered his face again, and missed seeing an expression on Bellway's face that he's never seen before.

Chapter 68
The same name, Part 12

Ratoka quietly looked down at the girl sleeping in front of him.

Her black hair was scattered on top of the white bedsheets. Her icy gaze and those red eyes resembling the setting sun, he couldn't see right now. Her smooth white skin, was losing its luster.

Even though it's already been a month since she's returned from Fort Jugfena, Eliza has been doing nothing other than sleeping this whole time.

The next night, right after Ratoka learned about Eliza's condition from the soldier that returned from Fort Jugfena, he snuck out again, to Eliza's room. According to what the soldier had said, Eliza was always stuck in this state. Although she wasn't injured, it seems that a guy named Kamil had died at Fort Jugfena, which may have caused an injury to her heart instead.

The fact that Eliza spends most of her time sleeping, Bellway had told him frankly that day. Since he hadn't heard the full story from the soldier, he figured that Bellway probably found out that he met up with the soldiers and probably didn't mind too much.

Eliza also wakes up from time to time. She would open her eyes, and get up, but wouldn't move. What's more, she wouldn't react to anyone voice, and she wouldn't even walk. She won't even make idle chat with anyone. Nor does she seem to react to pain.

Even though she's still alive, Ratoka felt like Eliza might as well have been a living corpse. She doesn't show any emotions, she doesn't talk, nor does she respond to anything.

Maybe, it was her mind that had died, not her body.

And right now, Ratoka just kept looking at Eliza for quite a long while.

Ratoka was holding a silver knife in his right hand. Right now, there's no one by Eliza's side. And, Eliza can't possibly resist in her current state.

His brain still felt numb. He also felt a strange sense of something resembling elation.

Spending time in the barracks, and spending more time in the mansion again, he's learned many things in this time.

That nobles are not all evil. That the young girl named Eliza, was properly carrying the burden of her father's crimes, as well as her own sins.

That Eliza was trying to allow him to live.

Her way of life, resolution, beliefs, even knowing all these, there was still a reason that Ratoka had a knife in his hand.

The fact that Igor and the others from the army had died, he blamed Eliza.

The reason that they had to deploy to Fort Jugfena, was because Eliza had decided to accept the refugees. Calvin had said that Eliza was the one to aggressively push for Kaldia accepting the refugees.

Even if she's not as arrogant as the nobles he's heard about, she still didn't care enough for the lives under her, and as a result her soldiers died.

He can't forgive her due to his loneliness caused by the soldiers' deaths, and he has nobody else to blame other than Eliza.

Ratoka encouraged the hatred building up within him, and slowly raised his hand holding the knife as well.

If he kills her, this time for sure he'll probably die as well.

There's nobody here that would protect him.

He's scared of dying. But, the words he had spat at Eliza before weren't mere bravado.

He was shaking. His heartbeat was getting faster.

Right now, inside Ratoka, a variety of emotions and memories were furiously flying about and changing places with each other.

His hand holding the knife in the air was trembling. Even though he had come here without hesitation, he couldn't figure out why he couldn't bring down his weapon.

His mother's face, the rock incident at Cyril village, the dark feelings he had from Igor and the other soldiers' deaths, the things he learned at the mansion, everything was jumbled together in his mind.

"……Urgh!"

His trembling right hand with the knife, he gripped with his also trembling left hand.

Even if he's confused, it's fine. All he has to do is make his hand obey, and swing down like he wants to.

As long as he does that, she'll probably die very quickly.

– But, even after a long time, he still didn't bring down the knife. His hands were only trembling.

He forgot to even breathe, nor could he do anything with his knife, as he watched Eliza continue to sleep, his vision began to get blurry from tears.

He can't keep this state forever, Ratoka thought.

Then, he finally started gasping for breath, and remembered to breathe. He couldn't say anything, all he could do was take deep breaths of fresh air.

Then, at that moment, he suddenly recalled Elise's gentle smile. It was such a sudden bright flash, that it felt like he could really see her before him, as an illusion.

Suddenly, Ratoka collapsed on the floor, like a puppet whose strings had suddenly been cut.

Clang, the knife fell on the floor with a light sound.

His heart is pounding so hard…… it even feels like it's hurting his ears. Even though he's not feeling painful or sad, for some reason he couldn't stop the tears from coming out of him.

Having enough hatred to lead to a murderous intent, Ratoka no longer possessed that.

"Shit…… Shit……!!!!"

In his frustration Ratoka tried to punch the floor, then he reached his hand out to Eliza. He grasped the cloth of her high quality nightgown, and shook her.

"Wake up, you…… bastard! You, even though you haven't done anything for the villagers……!!"

Pitter patter, Ratoka's tears were falling onto Eliza's cheeks. There was no expression on her face, it looked almost like a doll's, a fake toy of some sort.

"Wake up, wake up!!! If you keep sleeping, I, can't even bring myself to hit you……!!"

Even shouting at her with all his emotions, and shaking her as hard as he could, Ratoka got no response. Ratoka didn't get anything he wanted, all he could do was continue crying and whining.

At his powerlessness and emptiness, he lost even the energy to keep shaking Eliza. He collapsed on her bed, and simply kept crying for as long as his voice held out.

All his invisible anxiety, all his emotions that he wasn't able to organize, his stress, his loneliness, his resentment, everything had reached its limit, he vented all his anger and frustration towards Eliza all at once.

Ratoka, after all, was still a child that wasn't even ten years old yet.

What's more, since his mother had gone insane, he didn't have a proper upbringing, and his emotional development had gotten distorted.

Even though he's older than Eliza, he's much more of a child than she is.

He just kept venting all his mixed feelings by crying, although for how long it lasted, Ratoka didn't know.

But, after he finished crying, he fell asleep on Eliza’s bed, just like a baby.

Eliza, in her foggy state of consciousness, after the crying stopped, reached her hand out to him.

Chapter 69
The nameless gravestone

A month of sleeping had definitely decreased Eliza's strength and stamina. Her body didn't move the way she wanted it to, and it felt heavy. Since it's come to this, she actually wanted someone to lend her a hand, but there was nobody that did so.

All she could do was support herself against Rashiok, and proceed almost at a crawl.

And so, she arrived at a small pond close by to the garden. The poisonous hemlock that had killed her family was still growing greenly under the sunlight, and entered Eliza's field of vision. Although there were also bright floral colors to be found here during the summer, right now it's already past mid-autumn, and there were only drab brown and green colors to be seen.

This pond has been minimally affected by humans. Without paying mind to that, Eliza walked around the edges of the pond.

This pond was currently treated as a water reservoir only, and it was created long ago to complement the garden.

It was built even before the mansion existed, from a time long long ago.

That's why, there were still traces of people from long ago left around this pond. The right side of the pond can be seen from the mansion's garden, and various trees' shadows fell across the pond water, and below the trees were some stones here and there. Eliza plopped herself down onto a flat tree stump.

There was a slight sound as the water rippled slightly from the wind which was also swaying the grass, and other than that all Eliza heard was her own heartbeat.

Although the air was chilly, thanks to Rashiok lying down beside her and warming her up, she quickly forgot the coldness in the air.

As she sighed, Eliza stopped to look at a certain location. Her line of sight was directed at the base of a tree, where there was a polished stone that was a little less than half her height.

It was a gravestone.

Although there was no name engraved on it, nor was there a body actually buried under it, it was still a gravestone.

Eliza reached out and brushed away the dust on the gravestone with her fingers.

Rashiok had carried her to the mansion, leaving Kamil's body behind, and this is the first time that she's come back here to this pond. She hadn't forgotten the person that this gravestone belonged to, it's just that she had gotten tied down by all her emotions and feelings.

"-It's been a while. Sorry for not coming all this time."

Eliza began talking to the gravestone in a small voice. Of course there was no reply. Since gravestones are meant for dead people, she didn't expect any replies.

"……I let an important person to me die. All because of my own foolishness."

Even so, Eliza kept talking to the gravestone, all by herself, alone. Even though her fingers were getting dirty from wiping the gravestone's surface, she didn't care.

"Kamil…… You've become such an important person to me……"

There was only the rustling sound of the autumn wind blowing through leaves in response. The sound echoed everywhere, while Eliza silently thought to herself for a little bit.

"I had always thought that if I trusted people, I would be betrayed and lose my life, but now I know that I can't live life without trusting in people. ……Or maybe, I should say that I felt it would be better to die rather than be betrayed."

After saying that, Eliza fell silent for a moment again. She lowered her gaze to escape the harsh glare of the sunlight.

"……Thanks to all this, I've remembered various things in my dreams that I've long since forgotten. Even though I have all these memories, just what has all this become……"

She was saying all these words with no force behind them. There was no intonation to her voice, and it was obvious that her voice sounded empty.

Right now, Eliza's heart is still being ruled by her thoughts of the departed. When Eliza had been woken up by Ratoka shaking her that much and shouting in her ears, she had actually been quite pissed, but right now she's actually not that different from when she was asleep.

After losing Kamil, it was like there was a big hole inside her, from which her emotions and feelings had fallen out of.

"……I've slept for quite a long time. I finally woke up because that boy shook me so much. I guess I should call him Elise. Kamil, you'd asked me just what I was doing before, giving him that name so similar to mine, someone he hates so much. It was so that I could create another girl named Elise…… Just exactly what was I doing, I wonder. Rather than something like that, I could have been doing better things……"

Eliza almost sounded like she was whimpering, and fell silent again. She recalled again the crying face of Ratoka when he had woken her up.

Even if someone comforted her, or encouraged her, Eliza's foggy world still wouldn't clear up. Her sleeping all this time, had probably been a form of escape. At the very least, she didn't suffer while she was asleep, she wouldn't feel sadness or guilt or anything else. Even if it was deceiving, it was still a kind of peace.

It was Ratoka's explosion of emotions that had finally dragged Eliza out, forcing her to face reality again.

Although Eliza had thought that Ratoka was pretty smart for his age, it seemed that he's also a bit emotionally underdeveloped for his age as well. Maybe she has to change a little how to deal with him, but she couldn't come up with any ideas currently.

In her previous life, she had no experience in dealing with children whatsoever, and in this life, she also has nobody her own age as a friend either. She had no understanding of how children's emotions were supposed to develop, and in the first place she herself lacked expressive emotions, so Eliza was completely lost on this.

Eliza looked away from the gravestone, up at the sky.

The blue sky hadn't changed at all, whether Kamil was alive, or when he died, it remained the same.

"……Being born into an otome game's world, I had thought that it would be more fun. I reincarnated as a noble girl villainess, but why did it turn out this way?"

While muttering that to herself, she dragged herself over to Rashiok and climbed on his back.

The only creature listening to Eliza's monologue all this time was her draconis, who finally cried, "kuu-on" in return.

End of Act 1, Part 4

Cast of characters

Eliza Kaldia – Born on 1/6, Year 606 of the Holy Arxian Calendar
The main character of this story. In her previous life, she had played a medieval European fantasy otome game that's become the setting of this story, and she's reincarnated as a villainous noble girl character in the game, but her life is taking an unexpected direction.

Orville Kaldia – Born in Year 579, died age 29 in Year 608
Eliza's father, and the former domain lord of Kaldia. A madman that drove his own domain to poverty.

Earl Terejia / Siegmund Terejia – Born on 2/22, Year 539
An elderly noble sent by the royal capital to be Eliza's guardian. A former priest noble without his own lands.

Kamil Novak – Older than Eliza by 6-9 years, born in fall
A young man in service to Eliza. His father had been a major merchant from another country. Calls Eliza "Charlie" for some unknown reason.

Rashiok
A draconis that Eliza is raising.

Mrs. Galton / Kerry Sakir Galton – in her early 30s
A nanny hired by Earl Terejia. From the area of Greenfield, she has some unique views on femininity.

Mrs. Marshan / Regina Florence Marshan – in her upper 20s
Eliza's governess hired by Earl Terejia.

Gunther Pavel – Born in Year 586
A young soldier in the Kaldia domain's army. Eliza's sword and spear instructor. As a former bandit, his mouth is quite foul.

Marquis Rittergau / Radian Terejia Rittergau
Earl Terejia's older brother, the head of the Terejia family. The prime minister of Arxia.

Priest Faris
A high-ranking priest that is acquainted with Earl Terejia.

Elise Sherstok – Born in Year 603
A sickly girl that's staying in Kaldia to recuperate. Baron Sherstok's daughter.

Bellway Musser – Born in Year 588
Earl Terejia's secretary.

Maya
Elise Sherstok's maid.

Elise Cherstoka / Ratoka
A child under the protection of Eliza. He's slightly older than Eliza.

Claudia Rolentsor – Born 12/7, Year 596
A girl that's staying in Kaldia as one of Eliza's companions. As a member of the Rolentsor family, she excels in martial arts. Is absolutely terrible at remembering names.

Margrave Molton – Born in Year 590
The lord of the Molton domain. A silver-haired handsome young man. Has a son the same age as Eliza. He dotes on his son, and loves children.

Mrs. Hortensia
A nanny hired by Earl Terejia. Has a difficult to grasp personality.

Paulo Levski
A cavalry soldier in training belonging to the Kaldia domain's army. Is agile and courageous.

Ergnade Einsbark – Born in Year 588
The leader of the 1st Cavalry Platoon at Fort Jugfena. A young leader close to Gunther's age. Earl Einsbark's third son.

Earl Einsbark
In charge of the Jugfena royal domain as well as the highest-ranking commander at Fort Jugfena. A knight in the prime of life.

Volmar Einsbark
The leader of the cavalry troops at Fort Jugfena. Earl Einsbark's eldest son.

Wiegraf Einsbark
The military strategist of the cavalry troops at Fort Jugfena. Earl Einsbark's second son. Is skinny like his mother.

Teomer Terit – older than Eliza by 15-20 years
The young leader of the Shiru tribe. In charge of the Shiru warriors.

Tira – about Eliza's age
A Shiru girl. She has a very caring personality, and became Elise's playmate.

Reka – about Eliza's age
A farmer boy that's a new member of Eliza's domain. He became Elise's playmate.

Athrun – about Eliza's age
A Shiru boy. Since his father wasn't a member of the Shiru tribe, he has a complex about not being able to become a Shiru warrior. He became Elise's playmate, and also joined the Kaldia army.

Viscount Rogshia
A domain lord in the Greenfield region. Dotes on his only daughter Feria.

Feria Rogshia – Born in Year 600
Viscount Rogshia's only daughter. The fiancee of Viscount Ogren's son.

Viscount Ogren
A domain lord in the north of Arxia. Marquis Nordsturm's relative. He requested Eliza through the church to help him resolve the problems with his son's engagement to Feria Rogshia.

Cornell Freche – Born in Year 599
The third son of Earl Freche. A childhood friend of both Feria and her fiance.

Diferis
A terrorist member of the western church Alfena that entered Arxia. She has the mysterious power to manipulate monsters.

Melchior Nordsturm – Born in Year 591
A man who looks exactly like Orville Kaldia. Currently using the Nordsturm family name.

Marquis Nordsturm
A powerful noble that's the leader of the northern nobles.

Alfred Teal Arxia – Same age as Eliza
The second prince of Arxia Kingdom, as well as the crown prince. A capture target from the otome game.

Jeff Molton – Same age as Eliza
Margrave Molton's oldest son, and Eliza's friend. Greatly resembles his father.

Sieghart Rolentsor – Eliza's age
The main Rolentsor family's eldest son, and part of Prince Alfred's retinue. A capture target from the otome game.

Eric Teal Dovadain – Eliza's age
The second son of Archduke Dovadain, the king's younger brother. Part of Prince Alfred's retinue. His mother was a concubine, but he's treated equally to the eldest son. A capture target from the otome game.

Grays Teal Dovadain – Eliza's age
Archduke Dovadain's eldest son, and part of Prince Alfred's retinue. A capture target from the otome game.

Royal Families

Teal Family — *Royal family on the throne*

King

Queen Dionesia
Planates Princess

Princess Evaris ◄ ○
Melloart family

1st Prince Albert
Capture target

Crown Prince Alfred
Capture target

Melloart Family — *2nd Royal family*

???

Archduke Families

Teal Dovadain Family — *Archduke family*

Archduke Dovadain
Younger brother of the King

Wife

Concubine

Grays
Capture target

Eric
Capture target

Church

Church — *In charge of justice system*

Archpriest

High Priest

Chief Priest Faris
Earl Terejia's ex-Fiance
From Melloart family?

Marquis Families

Terejia Family — *Has 12 branch families. Workaholics.*

Marquis Radian Terejia Rittergau
Prime Minister, Siegmund's elder brother

Earl Siegmund Terejia
Eliza's guardian

Oscar Terejia
Branch family, serves Eliza

Rolentsor Family — *Famous military family*

Marquis Rolentsor
Commander-in-Chief

Sieghart Rolentsor
Marquis Rolentsor's grandson
Capture target

Claudia Rolentsor
Branch family, serves Eliza

Nordsturm Family — *Controls the North*

Marquis Nordsturm

Melchior Nordsturm
Suspicious dude

Margrave Families

Genas Family — *Most important border defense domain*

Margrave Genas

Wife
Handles the domain's internal affairs

Molton Family — *Domain NW of Arxia with rare resources*

Margrave Molton
Likes children.

Jeff Molton
Eldest son.

Governance Structure

High-level matters

Diplomacy matters: *decided by the King, the Archduke's family, and the Upper House of Lords.*

Royal family: *decided by the Royal Family, the Church, and the Upper House of Lords.*

Upper House of Lords composition

King, Prime Minister, Commander-in-Chief, Archpriest, High Priest, 3 judges, and 5 representatives of the House of Lords.

House of Lords composition

Domain lords with the rank of viscount or higher, and court aristocrats with the rank of earl or higher.

Earl Families

Einsbark Family — *Commands Fort Jugfena, defending the most dangerous border of Arxia*

Earl Einsbark
From a less influential branch of the royal family. Mediates between royal family and nobles.

Volmar - *1st son, leader of the cavalry troops*
Wiegraf - *2nd son, strategist*
Ergnade - *3rd son, leader of 1st cavalry troops*

Freche Family — *Leads Southern domains*

Earl Freche

Cornell Freche
3rd son
Likes Feria Rogshia

Ruktoferd Family — *Famous for horses*

Earl Ruktoferd

Viscount Families

Kaldia Family — *Questionable hobbies*

Eliza Kaldia

Orville Kaldia
Eliza's father. Dead.

Ratoka
Eliza's half-brother. Probably.

Henznaut Family — *Exports food stuff to Kaldia*

Viscount Henznaut

Rogshia Family — *Trades with Kaldia*

Viscount Rogshia

Feria Rogshia
Engaged to Viscount Ogren's son.
Likes Cornell Freche.

Ogren Family — *Nordsturm's cronies*

Viscount Ogren

Son
Engaged to Feria Rogshia

Glossary

~~Kingdom of Arxia~~

The country Eliza lives in, a major country that rules over the northwest portion of the continent. Also the stage of the otome game. Bordered by the sea to both the north and the west, while its eastern border and southern borders are guarded by mountain ranges, making it a natural fortress.

~Royal Capital~

The largest city as well as the capital of Arxia, the royal palace is also located here.

~Jugfena Region~

The Arxia Kingdom's southeast region, consisting of the easternmost domains to the south of the Amon Nor mountains.

Kaldia domain

Eliza's domain. South of the Amon Nor mountains. Borders the Jugfena royal domain, has a narrow shape that runs much longer from east to west, with a gentle hilly region in its west, and a lake region in its east. The villages are all concentrated in the west. The climate is warm, but winters are very chilly.

- **Area under direct control**
  Located in the westernmost part of Kaldia. The domain lord's residence, the Mansion of Golden Hills is here, along with the barracks, a wheat field, a small forest, pond, and river.
- **Cyril village**
  A village in Kaldia near the feet of the Amon Nor mountains. The village farthest away from the area under direct control.
- **Claria village**
  The most prosperous village in Kaldia. Located on the outer edge south of the area under direct control.
- **Nezu village**
  The southernmost village in Kaldia. Located in the middle of a large forest.
- **Pioneer village**
  The village constructed for the newest citizens of Kaldia. Located right in the center of Kaldia.

Jugfena royal domain
The border domain north of Kaldia. Fort Jugfena is located here for national defense.

- **Fort Jugfena cavalry platoon**
  A group of knights whose role is to guard the border.
- **Fort Jugfena defense corps**
  A defense corps consisting of people from the Jugfena royal domain. Unlike the regular army, they focus solely on border defense.
- **Monster Forest**
  Located in the Jugfena royal domain, an ancient forest where monsters and magical beasts reside. Used to be known in ancient times as the Great Alfena Forest. People are forbidden from entering.

Genas domain
South of Kaldia and Jugfena, and is currently the largest domain in all of Arxia. Simultaneously has to deal with border defense from both the south and the east, making Genas the most vitally important location geographically for border defense. Has cavalry troops.

Galbaito domain
A domain south of Kaldia whose lord is related to Margrave Genas. Later incorporated into the Genas domain.

~Freche region~

The southern region of Arxia, including west of the Karan mountains.

- **Freche domain**
  The domain bordering west of the Genas domain. Located on the southern border. Is the leader of the southern domains, they have their own social circles, and the main city under direct control here is even grander than the royal capital. Has cavalry troops.
- **Ruktoferd domain**
  The domain bordering west of the Freche domain. One of the southern domains. Famous for training military horses. Has cavalry troops.

~Greenfield region~

The inland region in between the Freche and Jugfena regions. The nobles in this region are shamed if their women are working.

- **Henznaut domain**
  The domain that's southwest of Kaldia. Has excellent livestock production.

~Ugaria region~

The northern region west of the Amon Albus mountains.to the mouth of the Ronde Ris Leguna River. Archaeological studies thrive here, and it has many remnants of ancient cultures.

~Fushobari region~

A region even farther north than Ugaria. Has many similarities to the Ugaria region.

- **Molton domain**
  Located at the farthest northern tip of the Fushobari region, bordering the sea. It's so far from the royal capital that it takes a month to travel there by horse-drawn carriage, but since rare resources are produced here, the domain has quite a lot of power.

~Zellutelutsviha~

An independent territory located in the southeast of Arxia. 50 years ago, it converted to the Ar Xia church, and it got integrated into Arxia. Originally a vassal state of the Arxia Kingdom.

~The North~

Between the black Amon Nor and the white Albus mountains, is a vast barren area of remote frozen ground. Because of that, it's a little bit behind the times, but it has its own distinctive culture.

- **Nordsturm domain**
  The domain of the family that rules the north. Produces hardly anything, but has a thriving financial industry.
- **Ogren domain**
  A tiny domain in the western portion of the north.

~Sacred Holy Lawful Kingdom of Arxia~

The religious kingdom that was the previous incarnation of Arxia. Founded by the combined countries that supported the Church of Ar Xia. Established approximately one thousand years ago, and became the Arxia Kingdom six hundred years ago. Its first king was St. Ahar, from the Ar Xia church.

~Ar Xia Church~

Arxia's national church, as well as the largest sect of the Xia church. Believes in the god Misorua. Its founder St. Ahar was also the first king of the Sacred Holy Kingdom of Arxia. Kusha Fema left behind the Sacred Code, which followers abide by.

~~Eastern countries~~

A group of countries to the east of Arxia.

Densel Dukedom
A country bordering Arxia. Highly hostile to the Arxia Kingdom. The western dukedom of the former Rindarl Kingdom.

Planates Dukedom
South of Densel Dukedom, and also borders Arxia along the Genas domain. The southern dukedom of the former Rindarl Kingdom.

Giograd Dukedom
Located east of Densel Dukedom. The northern dukedom of the former Rindarl Kingdom.

Parmigran Dukedom
Located east of Planates Dukedom. The eastern dukedom of the former Rindarl Kingdom. Since it trades over the sea with southern countries, it has the highest prowess in shipbuilding and navigation of all the northern countries.

Rindarl Kingdom
A former kingdom that ruled over the northeastern portion of the continent. Now split up into four smaller dukedoms and a city-state in name only, with only a remnant of its former capital remaining.

Rindarl Union
A country consisting of the four dukedoms, Densel, Planates, Giograd, and Parmigran, that have united into one.

~~Religions~~

West Alfena Church
A dangerous anti-Arxia terrorist organization that's a sect of the Revua church.

Xia Church
According to the teachings of Kusha Fema, they believe in only one god, Misorua. They abide by scriptures known as the Sacred Code. Kusha Fema's descendant, St. Ahar, created the largest sect of the Xia Church, known as the Ar Xia Church.

Revua Church
The main religion of the eastern countries, a religion with many gods.

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